

## Generation in Interaction: a model for an intergenerational learning centre

### *Generation in Interaction: un modello per un centro d'apprendimento intergenerazionale*

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#### abstract

This paper will introduce the initial outcomes of the Erasmus KA2 project “Ge&In” (Generation in Interaction). Nowadays, in the context of lifelong learning and continuous education, education services are not only conceived in a sectorial way, or related to the different stages of life, but are oriented towards promoting a positive relationship between generations, based on a shared vision of learning and transformative processes. In this scenario we looked at several intergenerational centres both in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, which were observed and analysed during an explorative research project to identify the educational, social-political, and even architectural requirements for a transferable model.

**Keywords:** intergenerational learning, lifelong education, adult education, model, educational policy

The article is the result of the joint work of the three authors. However, the introduction and first paragraph can be attributed to Matteo Cornacchia the second paragraph to Gina Chianese and the third to Elisabetta Madriz.

Il contributo intende presentare i primi risultati di una ricerca condotta nell'ambito del progetto Erasmus KA2 "Ge&In" (Generation in Interaction) sull'apprendimento intergenerazionale. Nel tempo della formazione e dell'apprendimento permanenti – per richiamarsi alla call – l'efficacia di alcuni servizi educativi si misura nella loro capacità di non essere settoriali o circoscritti a determinate fasce d'età, ma appositamente concepiti per alimentare una positiva relazione fra le diverse stagioni della vita, secondo una visione di autentica continuità, di scambio trasformativo e permanenza delle esperienze di apprendimento. In questa direzione si rileva come su tutto il territorio nazionale, oltre che europeo, si stiano diffondendo "centri di apprendimento intergenerazionale" di varia natura che sono stati mappati nel corso della ricerca al fine di individuare i requisiti – pedagogici, politico-sociali e, in ultima istanza, anche architettonici – di un possibile "modello".

**Parole chiave:** apprendimento intergenerazionale, Educazione permanente, Educazione degli adulti, modello, politiche educative

## 1. Introduction

The following paper aims to set out the initial findings of the "Ge&In" project (Generations in Interaction – Intergenerational Learning as a Constructor of Identity and Culture). This project was carried out as part of the Erasmus Plus program, financed by the European Commission through Key Action 2 (Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practices) and dedicated to the theme of Intergenerational Learning.

There has been a steady increase in initiatives designed to bring together individuals or groups of individuals from different generations in several European Union member states over recent years. The shared goal of these initiatives is to improve social cohesion while simultaneously reducing the risks associated with exclusion and marginalisation. These initiatives were sporadic at first, implemented without any specific guidelines, but largely driven by a genuine belief in the value of informal interactions between subjects of different age groups as a solid foundation upon which to promote a culture of solidarity and active citizenship. Slowly, as the concept of "intergenerationality" moved into the mainstream, adopting a theoretical foundation along the way, it became necessary to analyse these initiatives and attempt to identify any shared characteristics underpinning them. The purpose of this was to lead to the creation of a shared framework that would serve to provide an evidence-

based pedagogical foundation for their approaches, as well as supporting future programs of a similar nature.

In pursuit of this goal, the research project created a network of seven partners from five European countries (Finland, Poland, Slovenia, Romania and Italy), all of whom are involved in the fields of adult education, information technology and socio-educational research. The overarching aim of the project is to increase efficacy in the promotion of intergenerational learning over a two-year period (2018-2020). The primary target is people involved in education and training in the adult education sector (including teachers, facilitators, instructors etc...). The secondary target identified is people who live and work in an intergenerational environment, promoting an exchange of culture and values and enhancing intergenerational social cohesion. The project also established a set of specific goals to feed back into the overarching goal. These were identified as: creating opportunities for intergenerational learning to develop social cohesion; supporting intergenerational learning in teaching and social activities; and training teachers, facilitators and educators to identify and use intergenerational learning as a resource in teaching and training. Within this project framework, the research team at the University of Trieste (Department of Humanities) took it upon itself to develop a blueprint for a model centre for an intergenerational learning. As this project is still ongoing, the following document represents a midpoint progress report with three core areas of focus: analysis of the theoretical foundations underpinning the intergenerational programs; establishing lenses through which to understand the practical tools of intergenerational learning; and identifying the elements which, combined, create a holistic “model” for educational activities.

## 2. The theoretical foundations: characteristics of “intergenerational programs”

Exploring the concept of “intergenerational learning” through analysis of best practice, policy steps or even something as modest as the literature on the subject immediately highlights an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, the texts regarding experiences and the diffusion of the underlying theoretical foundations are all, broadly speaking, from the last two or three decades: the fact that the *European Year for Active Ageing and Sol-*

*identity between Generations*<sup>1</sup> was only as recent as 2012 is an indication of the relatively recent nature of this debate.

On the other hand, those involved in the learning process and in the educational process more widely know all too well that these tools are the result of generations upon generations exchanging, sharing and passing down information from one to the next. Rather than being discussed in the proper terms of a distinction between roles and responsibilities, it appears in the collective imagination as the common expressions of formal learning – the scholastic environment being one example – not only in the most basic relationship between parents and children. The emphasis therefore ends up being placed on the simplified labels of “educating” and “educated” generations – the adults teaching and the children or adolescents learning.

Despite multiple new interpretations, including critical ones, of this clichéd approach, the age of those involved remains the primary data point. As a consequence, these learning programs are seen as “intergenerational” by definition, without any of the additional conditions included in several recent studies.

It may therefore be helpful to begin here, starting *in medias res*, in order to better understand the defining features of the learning processes that should be met for them to qualify as “intergenerational”. In April 1999, a UNESCO Institute of Education initiative created the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs. This organisation is widely credited with taking the lead on the creation of a shared guidance framework for the various programs of intergenerational interactions in different countries. Despite the difficulties inherent in balancing a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds, the members of the consortium were able to reach a common definition of intergenerational learning programs as “social vehicles for the purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations” (Kaplan, 2001, p. 4; Boström, 2003, p. 17). Newman and Hatton-Yeo also mention this conference as a crucial moment in setting out a frame of reference. However, they also point out that the US National Council on Aging (NCoA) had, to a degree, anticipated the need to find a common de-

1 See Decision No. 940, adopted by the EU on 14th September 2011 and published in the Official Journal of the European Union as L. 246/5 on 23.09.2011.

nominator for social initiatives bringing together young and old, back in 1981. Here, intergenerational programs were defined as “planned ongoing activities that purposefully bring together different generations to share experiences that are mutually beneficial. Typically, the programs involve interactions that promote social growth and learning between the young and the old” (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008, p. 32).

These introductory readings alone already make certain critical factors clear, and these are useful in avoiding the mistake of instinctively considering any educational relationship between people of different generations as being intergenerational.

First and foremost, in order to immediately exclude parents and children or grandparents and grandchildren, the sources approached here emphasised the absence of biological ties between the participants as a common denominator in the intergenerational programs. This shifted the nature of the discussion from the family to the social environment. Historically speaking, the increase in intergenerational initiatives followed the demographic changes of the early 1980s. During this period, welfare programs overwhelmingly underwent root-and-branch reforms, taking on responsibility for areas of care that had previously been seen to belong to the wider family network (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008). This introduced a community – or even political – dimension to intergenerational actions, and increased the likelihood of similar initiatives generating the expected mutual benefits, from single beneficiaries to the collective wellbeing. The NcoA’s emphasis on the “mutually beneficial” element is another key point that arises from the literature. This creates a clear break from the “traditional” model of formal learning, embodied by the relationship between teacher and students. As Boström (2003) highlights, any discussion of intergenerationality inherently discusses the notion of “social capital”, in any of the various incarnations through which this concept developed, from its origins in Coleman to the more systemic approaches of Putnam or Fukuyama. Broadly speaking, theories on social capital refer to the resources available to individuals through their networks of relationships: they presuppose a political action – whether the subject is private or public – designed to integrate increasingly complex and difficult narratives to contain forms of marginality and social exclusion. Adjusting the way we observe projects of an intergenerational nature from a sociological approach to a pedagogy-centred one – taking all due epistemological care along the way – leads to a natural fit within the fields of social pedagogy and the community.

The unique element of such programs, when compared to other approaches such as social work or the so-called community psychology, lies in wondering about the forms, evolution, and implicit and explicit dynamics of education *of* and *for* the community (Tramma, 2010).

Lastly, as a direct corollary to the points raised above, it is not hard to see how steps taken with the goal of promoting intergenerational ties, forging learning opportunities throughout every phase of life, and encouraging proactive and productive attitudes come to be interpreted through the lens of “lifelong learning”. As initiatives which primarily revolve around sharing experiences among subjects of different generations, they fall under the definition of informal learning, albeit not exclusively so, and therefore contribute to the notion of intergenerationality as a distinct concept, different from a simple (and formal) transfer of knowledge between teachers and students, as is the case in scholastic environments.

### 3. Analysis criteria for best practice in the “Ge&In” project

“Ge&In: Generations in Interaction – Intergenerational Learning as a Constructor of Identity and Culture” approaches intergenerational learning within the context of social and community pedagogy as a central response to the vital need for social inclusion and cohesion.

The planning and launch of the initiative was conceived and developed as a collective effort between multiple participants. It began with a basic hypothesis – that intergenerational learning can promote an exchange of cultures and values and enhance generational awareness, thereby improving intergenerational social cohesion. This hypothesis was introduced by the Kansalaisfoorumi (who coordinated the project) and the University of Eastern Finland, and a later search for partners<sup>2</sup> for plan-

- 2 The partner consortium includes seven entities: 1. Sivistysliitto Kansalaisfoorumi (SKAF) as coordinator in co-operation with Svenska Folkskolans Vänner (SFV), Finland – 2. University of Eastern Finland (UEF), Finland – 3. Vitale Technologie Telecomunicazioni – Viteco S.r.l., Italy – Fundacja Autocreacja, Poland – 5. Asociația Central European pentru Integrare Socioprofesională ACTA, Romania – 6. Ljudska Univerza, Zavod za Izobraževanje in Kulturo, Rogaska Slatina (LURS), Slovenia – 7. University of Trieste (UNITS), Italy.

ning and developing detailed plans was launched through the EPALE platform.

In January 2018, writing began for the project, with weekly online meetings of all of the partners and with the materials made available in shared folders. This provided a real sense of engagement among the partners from the very beginning (Clark, 2002), with a more effective (self) attribution of roles and tasks based on skills, areas of expertise and goals.

The broad objective, as set out in the introduction, was then translated into operational terms with four Intellectual Outputs (IO): a written training guide for professionals in the field of Lifelong Learning (IO1); a course for the formal, informal and business sectors on intergenerational learning (IO2); a model for an intergenerational centre (IO3); and an online platform for exchanging information and products relating to the project (IO4).

In addition to being responsible for the overall project evaluation, the Trieste research team also took on responsibility for IO3: this decision was due to a clear understanding that physical separation and limited contact between generations reduces the potential for learning opportunities, limits the exchange of knowledge and skills development, atrophies social and emotional growth and impedes dissemination of the core values.

It should be noted that, for a long time, intergenerational learning was taken to mean the *informal medium* within the family for sharing knowledge, norms and values and for developing skills and abilities, with the partial goal of ensuring younger generations retained a deep sense of their own history and culture and providing a continuous link between the generations (Hanks, Ponzetti, 2004).

In a highly-complex social environment, this family-based intergenerational model has been replaced with an “extrafamilial intergenerational model”. This has given rise to the development of organisations, projects and activities, originating in the USA (the Intergenerational Learning Centre in Providence Mount St. Vincent, West Seattle is considered a flagship example) before migrating to Europe, including Italy (albeit on a limited scale).

Here, the intergenerational centres could become an innovative community service proposal (Firshein 1996; Short-DeGraff & Diamond 1996) creating bonds between generations by demonstrating the wealth of possibilities unlocked by reciprocal learning processes, and enhancing social and community capital (Hoff, 2007; Kerka, 2003).

This was the starting point, with the ultimate goal of setting out a model for an intergenerational centre that the project's partners could then replicate in their own environments. The first step was to identify and analyse the current situation using the available literature, research and other best practice, and then dividing the findings into one-off activities, semi-structured activities and projects, intergenerational centres and cohousing project and/or experiences.

This primary research, conducted on a national and global scale, was followed by in-depth interviews and on-site observations.

The findings of the interviews were then collated into a collection of best practices, with the goal of revealing and analysing shared factors – even comparatively – among the activities and projects. The current state of analysis of the data already allows us to identify certain elements that will later be included in the model. The theoretical basis of these shall be detailed in the following paragraph:

- *the importance of relationships* – any model for an intergenerational centre (familial and/or extrafamilial) must focus on creating authentic and deep-rooted relationships between individuals;
- *the centrality of care* – meant as caring for oneself and others. This is a holistic approach that takes a comprehensive view of the individual, incorporating biological, social, cognitive and psycho-emotional factors;
- *intergenerational competences* – working with different generations requires professionals who are well-versed in new approaches to skills and abilities; they cannot only be experts in a specific sector, rather they must be intergenerational professionals;
- *intergenerational spaces* – this refers to the creation of spaces “designed” to promote intergenerational exchanges, therein opening a space for investigating the relationship between intergenerationality and architecture (Vanderbeck, Worth, 2014);
- *the “link” of the generations* – in addition to the “extremities” (infancy and old age), in intergenerational learning there is also the generations and figures bridging the gap between the two extremes. This enables a wider discussion of intergenerationality which takes in all the different stages of life.

#### 4. Preliminary notes for a model of an intergenerational centre

The range of activities identified during the research phase and their division into the four subgroups immediately revealed that for an activity to qualify as a “centre for intergenerational education”, it had to measure up to certain unavoidable scientific principles. These elements, as shall be demonstrated, are less about the structure and more about the content. Their synergetic presence, however, nonetheless enabled the identification of characteristics that enable the formation of a model underpinned by best practice.

In order to describe the course of the research, it is important to first shift momentarily to the concept of a “model”, of its role in formal sciences and how this has been adapted for the social sciences, and specifically for pedagogy. The most common meaning of the concept, known as a “model of a theory”, is a collection of statements that are met, or that could – in a given theory – be taken as axioms themselves or serve as the intuitive cornerstone for a series of axioms. This approach fits the definition for the concept of a “model of an intergenerational centre” as outlined in this research. The goal is to establish a set of criteria, and through this to construct a theory underpinned by statements that separate the many potential activities for different generations and the realistically available spaces, based on cultural and social charters, to create intergenerational educational pathways. The adjective “educational”, in this context, serves as the first dividing line. Education here is not any “temporal and spatial container” of activities that bring together and create relationships between people of different generations, regardless of the level of organisation. The core principle here takes the concept of “education” from the theories of MIP (Model in Pedagogy, on which more later)<sup>3</sup> and defines it as a pathway of “maximal achievement” (Dalle Fratte, 1986) of each person starting from their individual “resources”. This forms part of a wider debate which seeks to centre pedagogy as a practical-prescriptive science and which contains its epistemological characteristic within its

3 This theory is based on the text “Teoria e modello in pedagogia”, edited by Gino Dalle Fratte, Armando Editore, Rome, 1986. The text is the findings of research conducted by a group of academics. The result of a research symposium held in 1983, the shared goal of the project was to identify a scientific tool for pedagogical planning, starting from a reflection on the scientific standards of pedagogy.

project element. If it is the case that “the term ‘model’ has already been used by various scholars of pedagogy in various papers on educational issues generally and didactical ones specifically” then this was the result of the need “to provide additional tools of scientific validation for pedagogy” (Dalle Fratte, 1986, p. 7). This was the driving force behind the research output of the “Ge&In” project: identifying a tool of scientific validation able to single out the necessary criteria without which it would not be possible for a given practice to be defined as an “activity of intergenerational education”, however longstanding, well-structured or able it was to prove the “relational wellbeing” of its participants. This would be its role, and not that of sifting through the numerous existing intergenerational practices and determining which ones qualified as best practice or not. Its highest purpose, then, is that suggested by Agazzi, who argues that it is necessary to “enjoin the sciences to participate in promoting the “non-quantifiable” values that light the way in a civilised society and to provide the means to achieve them in the most effective way possible” (Agazzi, 2009, p. 34), as it is here that their responsibility lies. In the case of pedagogy, this refers to the responsibility to promote those values that directly impact an individual’s self-fulfilment.

Therefore, the core component of the model for the intergenerational centre is anthropological in nature: the first step shared by the partners in the project relates to an understanding of the “concept of person” in which participants in an educational project in different phases of life recognise themselves. The anthropological perspective referenced emphasises the dignity of the individual at all times and in every phase of life<sup>4</sup>, empowered by their originality and freedom, as well as emphasising their fragility, not as a defect but as a strength, an openness to bonds with the other. The target audience for an intergenerational education centre is identified in that individual who is in a phase of their life, from early childhood to old age, with needs and requirements that must be accommodated, understood and placed at the service of personal growth, the growth of others and the collective growth of the human race. In the model, the transition from the anthropological to the strictly pedagogical

4 On this subject, it should be noted that many of the experiences analysed are from the farthest ends of the life-cycle, i.e. children and senior citizens, and old age is often characterised by social distress, loneliness, age-related diseases and disability.

is guaranteed by the application of a fact-based approach that governs the balance between the idealised individual (as determined by anthropological principles) and practical goals, following which come practical and applicable steps and educational activities. By supporting each individual in their chosen path, these enable a positive shift while remaining loyal to the distinctiveness of each person. Indeed, as Dalle Fratte emphasises

it is the nature of a model to be correct when the sum total of relations that support it conform to the logical standards it employs. However, it will be objectively suitable, i.e. will prove a credible reference, when the operative prescriptions it enables conform to the relevant facts (efficacy of the model) and the values it is inspired by are objectively recognised (foundations of the model). It is precisely in order to guarantee the axiological basis of the model that it is necessary to detail the axiological fundamentals from which the pedagogical argument is sourced (Dalle Fratte, 1986, p. 22).

Aside from the element of continuity, the axiological fundamentals, as discussed in the aforementioned idea of person, must ensure coherence between the stated objectives and the educational activity: this coherence inevitably arises in the context of the intended and resulting intentionality. That makes the axiological fundamentals an indispensable component in detailing high-quality intergenerational pathways. Educational intentionality is guaranteed by applying the model, as the logical and methodological-procedural regulations are built into it, enabling the transition from an idealised program to a realistic program of personal achievement, according to the evidence-based approach (Minello, 2012). This is only reinforced in educational settings in which the participating individuals come from different ages, backgrounds, environments and abilities (Margiotta, 2015).

Ultimately, the operating norms are those that, when adapted to the different levels of conditioning (pedagogical, exercise and other important factors) of the individuals, guarantee rigorous standards in planning and implementation, and see reflexivity as the operative application of scientific falsification. Indeed, the assessment of an intergenerational educational program cannot lead to considerations only concerning how the individuals felt during the activities. It must also provide answers regarding the degree of positive change achieved by each participant in the process of developing the self.

Among those important elements (discussed in paragraph 3), which find a suitable place among the levels of conditions within the model, we can already outline a few preliminary reflections relating to aspects of particular interest and significance.

Let's begin with the aspects belonging to the physical conditions for the activities, the intergenerational spaces: the physical space of an intergenerational project must not be bland or improvised. It must be full of meaning, designed and built on the basis of the overarching values assigned to the relationships. If these relationships are to be genuine and profound, the shared presence of different individuals is, in and of itself, insufficient: the vision of the model, the realistic level of the condition of life and the here-and-now of the educational activity (central to which is the approach to care), must be managed and overseen (as well as being planned ahead of time) by competent mediators. This opens up an interesting area of research linked to the analysis of "intergenerational competences". Following the idea of the "link of the generations" to which an intergenerational project should be dedicated, these cannot be generic relational skills directly associated only with old people, children, disabled people or dementia sufferers. This makes it necessary to finalise the training courses dedicated to acquiring cross-sector skills (the objective of IO2). Here, the value of experience (which is of unquestionable importance) is added to, reinforced by, and intertwined with the values-driven rigour of intentionality. This provides a guarantee of a project apparatus that recognises its most authentically scientific characteristic in the assessment phase.

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