Generations learning together: Sustainability

In many countries in Europe the age profiles of populations are changing. This “demographic change” is caused by the fact that birth rate is decreasing while the average life expectancy is increasing. German statisticians predict that by 2050 two thirds of the population of Germany will be over 60 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2003).

These changing age profiles may have an influence on learning between generations, which used to happen implicitly. There is some concern that this implicit learning will decrease, and that therefore more intergenerational learning should take place explicitly in educational organisations (cf. Klerqc 1997: 87).

In Germany we also have the situation of different generations existing in parallel, with completely different starting points or life situations. The older generation benefits from the advantages of a social welfare state while the situation of the current younger generation is precarious concerning social security, unemployment and family planning (cf. Britten 2003: 41). What does that mean for intergenerational learning concerning sustainability?

In this paper I outline the research programme “Generations learning together for sustainability”. Two preliminary results of the research programme are presented. Firstly, the results from our empirical method of group discussions are outlined. Secondly, an educational event, which took place in the context of the further education programme, will be presented. The paper draws a number of conclusions concerning the learning from these two processes.

1. Research Programme

1.1 Concept

The KBE (Catholic Federal Organisation for Adult Education – an umbrella organisation) has responded to the problem or challenge of demographic change by developing a further education programme for adult educators, focused on intergenerational learning and sustainability. Within that programme the participants design, implement and reflect on a

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project within their own organisations. In their projects the adult educators work with intergenerational mixed groups on current topics of sustainability. The programme is being evaluated by the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg.

The further education programme started at the beginning of 2007. In the first six months the adult educators participated in training sessions in which they learned about different generations and sustainability, on both a theoretical and a practical/didactical level. The first training session was focused on different concepts of the term “generation” and on different perspectives concerning relationships between different generations. On a practical level the adult educators worked with different objects which are exemplary for a spirit of each generation. With those “releasing-memories” objects a dialogue between the different generations was easily enabled. It became quite clear from this session that biographical work in adult education can function as a connecting element for an intergenerational dialogue.

The second training focused on sustainability. The challenge was to connect the idea of intergenerational justice and sustainability, as it is linked in the Brundtland report from 1987:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

• The concept of “needs”, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
• The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment ability to meet present and future needs”
(Weltkommission für Umwelt und Entwicklung 1987: 54).

The theme was developed using a variety of methods (like an alternative guided tour). The intention was to model methods, and thus enable the participants to use these methods in their own projects as well.

The third training session sought to combine the first two emphases and explore them further against the background of different learning concepts. During the phase of organising projects in their organisations the adult educators will be supervised by the KBE-project management and the evaluation team from Erlangen- Nuremberg. From June 2007 until March 2008 the adult educators organise and implement their own seminars and projects, focused on these themes, within their own organisation. All of the projects will be documented and presented at a conference in June 2008. In late 2008 a handbook will be published which will content the
main conclusions and examples for good practice. See Table 1 below for an outline of the project timetable.

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1.2 Questions of research and evaluation

We assume that in order to implement implicit learning concepts in organisations, images or “imaginations” of those implicit concepts are necessary. Therefore the main questions of evaluation are:

- How do adult educators imagine the process of intergenerational learning on the topic of sustainability?
- How do their images of intergenerational learning change as they take part in a further education programme concerning intergenerational learning, intergenerational justice and sustainability?
- What are the consequences of their imaginations for the sector of adult education?
- Can intergenerational learning, which takes place in families, be transferred to practice in educational organisations
To answer these questions a variety of evaluation methods are used. Within the evaluation, qualitative methodologies drawn from Bohnsack (2000) and Loos/Schäffer (2001) are used with the KBE-participants to find collective structures of meaning (Mannheim 1980) about topics of intergenerational learning. In order to find those collective structures the KBE-participants are asked about their images and imaginations of intergenerational learning during the programme. To find out more about the imagination of intergenerational learning we arrange different group discussions.

Group discussions are part of a research design methodology which aims to reconstruct collective orientations of different groups. The focus of the research is not the individual opinion but the collective orientations. Therefore the 16 participants were split, for the group discussions, into three smaller intergenerational mixed groups. The first discussion took place at the start-up meeting of the further education programme and the second one will be arranged in February 2008. In addition to these KBE-groups, other adult educators working in intergenerational settings on the topic of sustainability will be taken into account, if it is deemed necessary. The research design follows the concept of theoretical sampling (Glaser/Strauss 1976).

In addition to that main evaluation focus we use semi-standardised questionnaires to evaluate the single training courses and exchange meetings. Furthermore we use the method of a participant observation of the 16 projects to document possible good practice examples as well.

In the following section the initial results of the research project will be presented. First the preliminary results from the group discussions of the start-up weekend (January 2007) will be outlined. Then one of the practical projects that one of the participating adult educators implemented in their own organisation will be introduced.

2. First research results

2.1 Setting

Our first three group discussions took place on January 29, 2007 during the start up meeting of the further education programme. The group of 16 participating adult educators was divided into three smaller groups. Each group received the same input: “Today we begin the
further education programme “Generations Learning Together for Sustainability”. I am interested in your personal experience of that topic. Please tell me about your experience“

After that open question the groups discussed widely without interruption from the moderator. The discussions were led by three members from the Department of Education, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg.

2.2 Topics
In all three groups of adult educators the following subjects emerged and were discussed by the group members:

• **The participants’ individual experience with different generations within learning institutions** immediately emerged as an issue. At the start of the discussion the sequences are characterised by narrations of the experience with different generations within adult education seminars. In all group discussions an imbalance between the experience of dealing with different generations, and the experience of dealing with sustainability, became apparent. Most of the adult educators had a lot of experience dealing with generations but only very few had experience dealing with the concept of sustainability or education for a sustainable development.

• In all group discussions participants talked about different **definitions of the term sustainability**. What does it mean in general and how is it possible to use it in their projects and seminars?

• Participants all talked about **non institutional places of learning**. The adult educators do not usually locate intergenerational learning of sustainability in the usual indoor learning settings. Often outdoor excursions were mentioned because they can enable experiences in nature.

• Another main topic was the **understanding of learning and didactical arrangements and settings**. How is it possible to support an intergenerational learning for sustainability? In most cases the groups came to the conclusion, that experiential education, adventure and experience-based learning are beneficial arrangements.

• Furthermore in some cases the adult educators said that **story telling is a good didactical practice** within seminars where elderly tell their experience with nature to a younger generation.
• In all three groups the participants talked about different **generations as one new type of target group.** First of all they were interested in the question of how to address different generations as one group within the programmes of their organisations.
• At least one of the groups was very interested in **the topic of Cooperation.** This group talked about cooperation between institutions of adult education and other educational institutions like Family Education Centre

### 2.3 Similarities within the groups

The adult educators have a very abstract concept of sustainability. It is not a concept with which they usually work in their every day work. They are interested in the question of how to operationalise that concept within their programmes, and how to work with such a broad concept in their own projects and seminars.

All groups talk about that new target group “generations”. In most cases they referred to the German sinus milieu study (for adult education cf. Barz/ Tippelt 2007) where people are grouped into different milieu, defined as similar in their concepts of living and in their lifestyle. While they are talking about target groups the participants often ask how to provoke an engagement from the adolescents. It seems to be no problem for them to involve the older generations into intergenerational projects for sustainability but they do not know how to involve the younger generations.

When they were debating different settings or places where learning takes place, the participants also consistently talked about the difference between learning processes which are organised by adult educators, on the one hand, and learning processes which are happening in informal settings without the guidance of an adult educator, on the other. The relation between formal, non-formal an informal learning settings was a topic given serious consideration in all groups. The participants believe that intergenerational learning happens in most cases in informal family settings. But if you try – as an adult educator - to provide intergenerational learning for sustainability, it cannot be assumed that such learning happens naturally. Learning processes between generations need to be structured on a formal level, according to the discourse of participants.
2.4. Differences between the groups

In the first group the relation between sustainability and generations was discussed very intensely. The group tried to consider both aspects together. In the beginning of their discussion they talked about one example where grandfathers tell the younger generations their knowledge about nature. They discussed the problems which emerged within that former project. The group was eager to find ideas to support the idea of sustainability in their own organisations but they believe that sustainability has to be separated into different smaller topics to cope with it in the educational seminar or project work. Sustainability is also believed to be a term which can provoke frustrating feelings like “There is nothing one single person can do about global warming”.

The second group of adult educators started to tell of their experiences with generations in different learning settings. They discussed different kinds of learning and believe experienced based learning in non formal settings a good equivalent for intergenerational learning and sustainability. They discussed the problem of addressing different generations as a way to distinguish new target groups especially in the context of community projects. The members talked about negative examples, which lead to a non participating youth. In that context it was defined as a precondition for intergenerational learning in communities that the younger generation has to be taken seriously by the elderly. This second group focused more than the other two on the perspective of adolescents.

The last group discussed very intensely the difference between informal and formal learning. They asked how an informal learning between different generations within families can be transferred into formal educational settings.

2.5. Conclusions

The group discussion made quite clear, that intergenerational learning or the learning with different generations is imaginable for German adult educators. In most cases they have experienced the variety of relationships between generations – whether in their families or in institutional learning settings.

On the other hand, the participating adult educators have only limited experiences with the concept of sustainability. They have problems with imagining intergenerational learning for sustainability, because sustainability
- Is a huge and abstract concept and the adult educators have no ideas how to operationalise that concept.
- Provokes negative feelings and provokes feelings of being guilty.
- Is understood as a bulky term, which is not appropriate to win new target groups and participants.

These were the initial results from the group discussions in January 2007. From January till June 2007 the adult educators had their different training sessions and started planning and implementing their own seminars or events. In August the first project was started by one member of the further education programme in a small Bavarian community. It is outlined as an example.


3.1 Descriptions

In August 2007 an educational event took place in a Bavarian town. The literal translation of the event is: “Detectives of Energy”. In an old school building, participants aged from 4 to 90 worked in different settings about questions of Energy and Sustainability. The different generations worked together on that topic, using group work, excursions and discussions about the production, consumption and wastage of energy worldwide. The different experiences between the different generations concerning the use of energy resources were fruitful to the dialogue between them.

The participants had the choice of joining several events or staying within one group during all four days. About half of the participants worked together for four days. The group consisted of members from many generations, children, adolescents (but only the girls), adults and elderly people.

On their first day they visited a regional hydroelectric power station and talked about the river, the history of the river and the power station with experts. The second day involved several smaller events and was evaluated by the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. To start the group worked on a global networking game. In this game it is possible to experience the complex connection between global problems and wastage of energy in the northern and western countries. After this game, the participants split into different groups as detectives of energy. Two groups went into two private households with instruments to measure the current consumption of electrical equipment in every day life. One group of elderly people wrote a
story about the usage of energy in the nineteen thirties. Another intergenerational group was led by the local energy consultant. They build a solar oven and measured the power of solar energy by solar cells.

After that group work, the groups introduced their findings and discussed the usage of energy. When the elderly read their story, it was hard for the children to imagine how it would be to grow up without a TV nowadays.

Afterwards the whole group was brought to a local energy farmer who has a biogas plant. He explained how this plant works and how he uses this renewable energy. The last agenda highlight of that day was a story telling round. Local elderly were invited to tell their stories about the old river and the building of the hydroelectric power station.

On the last two days the participant created an exhibition about the topics renewable energy, biogas plants, hydroelectric power, and solar power and about the usage and wastage of resources. On Sunday the citizens of the community were invited to have a look at it. Around 60 people went through that exhibition. The project was visited and observed on the second day when a lot of smaller events took place. In the following I would like to present some results of that observation.

3.2 Results

Interaction between the different generations

In the global networking game and in the group activities the interaction between the different generations was very intense. In those cases they followed collective goals and worked together. This principle of working together on one topic is often referred to in literature (cf. Meese 2005: 38). In this project it was beneficial for the interaction when the different generations worked together in groups.

Different interest of the different generations

In this project every generation from age four until age 90 had been participating and it was a particular challenge for the project managers to cope with that. This was the case when the participants were visiting the biogas plant. The children were not interested in listening to how this plant works, they wanted to see and experience it, while the adults wanted to listen to the explanations and had a lot of questions. A didactical consequence of that experience is that children need additional tasks or an extra challenge for such listening situations.
Concept of sustainability

The project management was able to build a bridge between the topic “renewable energies” and sustainability. The former questions of how to operationalise this bulky concept had been forgotten. Renewable energies seemed to be a very good topic to connect the generations with the idea of sustainability because every generation had experiences with energies in different forms.

4. Conclusions

This project has brought to light a variety of issues regarding intergenerational learning and sustainability, as can be seen from both the initial analysis of group work undertaken by adult educators, and the observation of one example of project implementation. Further work carried out over the next thirteen months will shed further light on the learning available from, and challenges inherent in, education for sustainability within and between generations. I look forward to your comments, and to sharing further insights as they emerge.
References:


Author Information

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