# N E C E

# The Impact of Cultural and Citizenship Education on Social Cohesion

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# Input

**Workshop 7**
**Civic Participation in the Public Sphere: What Do Inter-generational and Local Projects Contribute?**

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**Social Cohesion and Intergenerational Learning Arrangements**

**1    Introduction**

The discussion about social cohesion implies questions about the "glue" of society (cf. Friedkin 2004). Which bonds keep us as individuals aligned to a more collective community? One important bond – as I argue here – is the intergenerational bond between older and younger people within societies. Therefore, in this paper an empirical perspective on intergenerational learning projects will be introduced.[1] This perspective is introduced by starting with some contextual remarks about demographic change and its potential impact on social cohesion. Secondly it will briefly describe the research design, before moving to focus on the empirical results concerning intergenerational learning – both its arrangements and its contribution to social cohesion.

**2    Contextual Remarks: Demographic Changes in Europe**

European societies experience significant demographic change. Age profiles in European countries are changing rapidly. Statisticians predict that in Germany and also in Lithuania, by 2050 nearly 30% of the population will be older than 65 years. These demographic changes might have effects on the relationship between different generations within societies, on their intergenerational learning and on local social cohesion. Given the context of these changes, it is necessary to develop concepts for aging societies (cf. Lloyd-Sherlock 2004). One way to cope with demographic change might be to create intergenerational programmes. In the UK and the United States these sorts of programmes have a long tradition and focus on the being together of different generations mostly in local communities (cf. Hatton Yeo 2006, Granville 2006). Another possibility might be to focus on learning among different generations and to design organized and professionally accompanied learning spaces for all generations. By doing so, different generations can learn about each other and about working and learning together in changing and aging societies.

In recent years, concepts of intergenerational learning at schools and adult education have been developed (Franz et al. 2009, Antz et al 2009, Marquard et al. 2008). But intergenerational learning is still a very young field of practice with little extant research. Against the background of this context the empirical study concerning intergenerational learning arrangements is situated.

**3    Research Questions and Research Design**

To find out how intergenerational learning is arranged, the empirical study focuses on those who arrange intergenerational learning for different generations in German adult education. Therefore the research questions were:

-   What do adult educators think about intergenerational learning?
-   How do they arrange intergenerational learning within institutions of adult education?

To answer these questions the research design focuses on three dimensions (see also Franz 2009; Franz/Scheunpflug 2009):

Firstly it focuses on the perspective of adult educators. Group discussions were conducted with four groups of adult educators who had no experience of intergenerational learning. They were also conducted with three groups of qualified adult educators who had taken part in a one-year education course concerning intergenerational learning. In this course, sixteen adult educators made several theoretical inputs and then went on to develop and conduct

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their own projects at their own different institutions (see detailed information in Franz et al. 2009). In addition to the group discussions, which are part of a methodology – which aims to reconstruct collective orientations – the qualified adult educators responded to several questionnaires, while the whole further education programme was also observed systematically.

The second dimension of the research focuses on analysing the perceptions of the participants regarding intergenerational learning arrangements – conducted by the qualified adult educators. To contrast the perspective of the adult educators, five group discussions with participants were conducted, all 272 participants responded to questionnaires and several intergenerational projects have been systematically observed.

In addition and also to provide a contrast, the perspective of groups who experienced intergenerational learning in an institutional context, the third dimension focuses on two group discussions of generations living together in a family or in an alternative housing project. The focus of the empirical study on intergenerational learning arrangements was to find out what adult educators think about intergenerational learning and how they arrange it.

## 4    Empirical Results

After a comparative analyses (cf. Bohnsack 2007) of the empirical material it was possible to identify from the data – according to Max Weber (cf. 1904) – three "ideal types" of intergenerational learning arrangements. They are formed from characteristics and elements of the given learning arrangements, but they do not correspond to all characteristics of any particular case. These types can be described as (cf. Franz 2009; Franz et al 2009):

- Type 1: Support for family learning,
- Type 2: Connecting different generations by working on "generative topics"
- Type 3: Pedagogical arrangements to enable experiences of difference

During the process of defining these types it was noticeable that the second type of intergenerational learning arrangements is very important for supporting local social cohesion. Therefore the paper focuses on this type, by introducing a project example which will be analysed afterwards.

## 4.1    Connecting different generations by generative topics

Intergenerational learning arrangements connecting different generations offer all participants the opportunity to work together on generative topics. The expression "generative topics" follows Paulo Freire and refers to important and relevant topics for a group which develop them further in the course of the learning process (cf. Freire 1970). This participative process is very important because it might strengthen social cohesion in local learning communities. This can be seen by the following project example.

*"Detectives of Energy"*

The "Detectives of Energy" project reached participants aged from 4 to 90 from a small village. For four days they worked together on the political topic of Energy and Sustainability, using group work, excursions and discussions about the production, consumption and wastage of energy worldwide. On the first two days of the project the participants from different generations were informed about the local perspective of sustainability by visiting a regional hydroelectric power station, the local

river and the local energy farmer, who has a biogas plant. The intergenerational perspective was very important for the project because of the local context. The knowledge of the elderly about the local area was valued in a story-telling round, where local elderly of 80 to 90 years were invited to tell their stories about the old river and the building of the hydroelectric power station (see picture). On the last two days the participants created an exhibition about the topics of renewable energy in their village, for all the locals.
*(Organiser: Dr. Theresia Wintergerst, for more information see Franz et al. 2009)*

This example contains different aspects of strengthening social cohesion. Adult educators arrange learning situations, which are embedded in a local social environment. Therefore the learning content is also interwoven with the local perspective. In this example the content "Energy and Sustainability" was experienced in the local environment by involving important locals like the energy-farmer or a local energy consultant and by visiting special learning places in the context of excursions, like the power station or the biogas plant etc.

Perspective of the participants
The perspective of the participants can be reconstructed from the empirical material by analysing the group discussions, questionnaires and protocols of the observed intergenerational arrangements. They mentioned that in this kind of learning arrangements they were enabled to share their biographical knowledge and experience and at the same time they learned to appreciate and value the knowledge and experience of the other generations. In addition they were enabled to develop their own generative topic together. In the example "Detectives of Energy" the participants developed the topic "Energy and Sustainability" further into "Renewable energies in our village!".

Another speciality of this project was the collective learning process concerning the history of the village. In a story telling round the elderly participants told the participants from other generations the history of the hydroelectric power station, how it was built by Russian and Jewish forced labourers in World War II and how the area became a meeting point for the younger generation in the Fifties. This example could show that coming to terms with the past can be very fruitful if it is arranged in an intergenerational fashion. The generation in the middle was especially fascinated and eagerly listening, asking many questions concerning the village history. They thereby gained a closer contact to the older generation. In this case the intergenerational bond within the community was strengthened, by talking about the past of the community.

By bringing those biographical and historical experience into the learning process, an accumulation of what Bourdieu would call (cf. 1983) "social capital" is evident in two respects: On the one hand, each individual can strengthen his or her own social capital by intensifying his/her relationships to other generations, and on the other hand a collectively and locally embedded social community capital is strengthened and shared by the participants. The growing of social community capital can also be shown in a description of the organising adult educator: According to the organiser, many locals were sceptical and critical about the biogas farmer and his plant before the project. Despite their scepticism, no one had talked to him directly. During the programme the people had the chance to visit the construction and to talk to the farmer. After the project they were relieved, and even developed an interest in energy farming. A new relationship was built with the farmer. This is a good example of how intergenerational learning arrangements can support and strengthen social cohesion at the local level.

Perspectives of Adult Educators

Adult educators who arrange learning opportunities for all generations by working on generative topics have assumptions concerning generations and project consequences for learning arrangements from their assumptions.

So they assume – according to the works of Karl Mannheim (cf. 1928/1964) – that every generation has a specific biographically- and historically-shaped knowledge. They believe that every generation has different perspectives and points of views. According to this assumption, the adult educators believe that this differing knowledge should be shared and discussed in intergenerational arrangements. Giving this context, they favour multi-perspective learning approaches for intergenerational learning. The basis of such arrangements lies in an appreciation of every generation, each individual and their differing structures of thinking. The adult educators try to use the perspective of the different generation as resources to support the intergenerational learning process. With the example of the detectives of energy, the adult educator used the perspective of the elderly to encourage a discussion about the past and the perspective of local key persons from the generation in the middle, like the energy farmer, to encourage discussions about the pros and cons of renewable energies.

The adult educators further assume that generations do not only have different perspectives; they also have differing needs, expectations and learning abilities. For arranging learning possibilities, the inclusion of all generations can sometimes be quite challenging, as pointed out in the group discussions. When different needs and abilities became obvious – for instance when some children did not want to listen to the stories of the elderly anymore and the generation in the middle was listening fascinatedly – the adult educator had to offer alternative learning possibilities. In this case she invented another learning possibility for the children by giving them some observation tasks. Therefore a pedagogical flexibility in providing alternative learning opportunities is needed.

## 4.2    Contribution to social cohesion

The type "Intergenerational Learning as connecting different generations" works with a generative topic, which is explored, accepted and further developed by the intergenerational group. This combination of generative topics and a local social environment might lead to an intense intergenerational learning process on the one hand but also to an increased feeling of togetherness within the community.

Both of it, the engagement with local generative topics and the feeling of togetherness, can be described as a foundation for local social cohesion. Against the background of the empirical material it is possible to argue that locally embedded intergenerational learning is one way to support building such a foundation. In professionally accompanied learning arrangements participants are enabled to learn more about their own communities: their different members, their topics, their challenges and problems. The learning process of the participants can also lead to increased engagement for the community. Therefore intergenerational leaning arrangements of the second type seem to be a bridge between institutional adult education and civil engagement in Germany.

## 5    Conclusions

As a conclusion, it is possible to argue that intergenerational learning arrangements which connect different generations with generative topics in a local social environment, contribute to social cohesion by strengthening the experience and feelings of togetherness in local communities and therefore building a foundation for local social cohesion. But also other

intergenerational learning arrangements might help to strengthen learning among generations and also strengthen the ties between young and old in aging societies.

Arrangements which support family learning, provide learning opportunities for children and grandparents or for children and elderly. Those family-orientated learning arrangements might help to strengthen new models of family structures in aging and changing societies. Arrangements supporting the experience of differences can be provided for elderly and adolescents. In a pedagogical setting younger and older participants are confronted with the perspective and the alterity of the other generation. Therefore this kind of learning arrangement enables those involved to get along with post-modern challenges such as appreciating and valuing difference and dissent.

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