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"Learning from Life and One's Own Biography" Workshops

Summary: In the article the author discusses the "Learning from Life and One's Own Biography" workshops organized as part of the *@ktywny Senior* project. The aim of the workshops was to provide an opportunity for exchange of thoughts and experiences and the recalling of events from the participants' past. The classes were organized to allow for the sharing of memories and a reflection on experiences from a different perspective. The participants reinterpreted their past and reflected on their achievements which made it possible for them to acquire a better understanding of themselves and their environment, to accept their choices, and to become more open. The classes were devoted to three topics, chosen by the groups – My educational path; The meaning of friendship in life; Do we need role models nowadays? On the meaning of following a 'master' in life.

Key words: Workshops, learning from biographies, exchange and (re)interpretation of experiences, story, (self-)reflection, understanding oneself and others.

In March 2009 I took part in the *@ktywny Senior* educational project aimed at adult inhabitants of the Popowice district of Wrocław. The main classes consisted of computer skills training, which were accompanied by learning English language vocabulary related to computer skills, group communication, "Learning from Life and One's Own Biography" workshops, seminars on gerontologies and philosophy, along with a "Educational relationships – parents, grandparents, grandchildren", and reading and media training.

During the project I conducted a series of workshops on the topic of "Learning from Life and One's Own Biography"; I am also the author of the workshops syllabus. The aim of the workshops was to provide an opportunity for an exchange of thoughts and experiences and the recalling of events from the participants' past. The classes were organized to allow for the sharing of memories and a reflection on experiences from the current, different perspective to attribute new meaning to them, which made it possible for the participants to understand the events from their past better. The events were interpreted anew. The participants had an opportunity to listen to similar stories told by others. They reinterpreted their past and reflected on their achievements which made it possible for them to acquire a better understanding of themselves and their environment, to accept their choices, and to become more open.

I conducted two two-hour classes with each of the six groups that I worked with. Each group had about 10 members, mostly women. I proposed a number of topics to be discussed during the classes. I also made it clear that I was open to group members' suggestions. At the beginning of the first class I introduced examples of topics of the periodic workshops that I had conducted in the previous years with the students of the University of the Third Age in Brzeg:

- ❖ My invisible environment.
- ❖ My educational path.
- ❖ My family history.
- ❖ The journey of my childhood.
- ❖ Childhood memories.
- ❖ Adult memories.
- ❖ The meaning of friendship in life.
- ❖ Emotions and their meaning in life.
- ❖ Image of my family home.
- ❖ Do we need role models nowadays? On the meaning of a master in life.
- ❖ Is there a formula for longevity?

Among the presented topics the participants of the workshops chose three:

1. My educational path.
2. The meaning of friendship in life.
3. Do we need role models nowadays? On the meaning of a master in life.

At the beginning of the first class I organized a "name cards" activity – everyone received a card to fill in – in order for the participants to get know each other better. They were to put the preferred version of their first name in the box at the top of the page. Then, the card was to be given to a person sitting two places to the left.

The person was to write down the names of a few things attributed with the name (features of character, a colour, a season of the year, an animal, a plant). The following stage of the activity was to present the name's connotations to the group and to confront the person who originally filled the card in. It turned out that attributing such things as features of character or animals to a name carries connotations to people we already know – relatives or friends. Such utterances as – “Every ‘Anna’ I’ve ever known was gentle; that’s why I chose a doe and white”, “Every ‘Grażyna’ that I’ve met was vigorous and charismatic; that’s why I chose a tiger and red” – could be heard. Very often the confrontations with the “owners” of the card revealed that the expectations were completely wrong. The activity “broke the ice” and put everyone in good mood.

For each of the topics that were to be discussed I had prepared an introduction that was to provide encouragement for an exchange of thoughts, memories, and experiences. The main method that I implemented throughout the workshops was the use of unfinished sentences written on cards prepared for the classes. Each participant was to pick cards at the beginning of the class. For example, for the “The meaning of friendship in life” topic it was possible to pick the following:

- ❖ To be friends is to...
- ❖ What is important to me in friendship...
- ❖ I could never make friends with...
- ❖ In friendship I value...

Once the participants had picked cards, we came into the “land of friendship”. We listened to many youth and childhood stories as well as some current ones. It turned out that friendship means something else to everyone and its faces are different. It turned out that many people cherish close relationships built up in their youth, which is a source of pride and satisfaction to both sides. The relationships are often strong, characterised by close bonds, mutual respect, faithfulness, and unselfishness. Thanks to that experience we found out that friendship is founded on a number of common features and we realized just how important it is in every human life.

The cards that I provided for the participants were a “pretext”, as it were, for them to speak, share their experiences and memories, and to learn, to get to know more about themselves and others, to strengthen self-awareness. I have noticed how helpful the cards are when working with adults. I attempted to create opportunities to recreate the past and to understand the present with the complexities of life better.

It turned out that the form I had proposed was well-received. There was no need to encourage the participants of the workshops to speak. The seniors shared their thoughts and experiences connected with the chosen topic willingly. I also made an attempt to provide an opportunity for everyone to “be a part” of the workshops; I did not, however, make it obligatory for everyone to answer. Very often one or more people who have no problems with public speaking are to be found in a group. They are individuals of high self-esteem and self-confidence who feel the need to share their opinions. They often initiate discussions and exchange

of thoughts. Apart from them there are those who naturally enjoy listening, observation, and "keeping to themselves". However, some of these individuals tend to "get out of the shadow" and present their thoughts and ideas to the group.

It is my belief that the participants appreciated the value of sharing their usually quite distinct experiences. In andragogics experience is given the status of a personal teacher of an individual, with recognition of its educational potential. One may learn a lot from reconstruction and restructuring of experience. It constitutes one of the forms of education. The presented stories and relations encourage the participants of the workshops to study each other. Listening to others discuss a given topic often provides numerous perspectives that are helpful in evaluating one's own experience. Hence, an opportunity is provided to attribute new values to past events. It is essential in constructing an evaluation of life, especially when it appears to be negative.

During the following meeting we discussed another of the chosen topics – "My educational path". All the participants picked cards related to the education that takes place at school as well as in the social environment (through interpersonal relationships, at work, among friends, in the family, during trips, in everyday life situations that require problem-solving skills, etc.). Examples of the cards:

- ❖ What taught me the most about life was...
- ❖ Education is...
- ❖ A person's educational path is...
- ❖ A person learns by...
- ❖ Why we should study throughout our entire lives.

All the participants recalled different educational situations that they had experienced in the past and that had changed them significantly. Then we listened to various interpretations of the notions of education and a person's educational path, just like in the case of the friendship-related topic.

The last of the discussed topics was "Do we need role models nowadays? On the meaning of following a 'master' in life". Examples of cards:

- ❖ One can gain respect by...
- ❖ A role model is a person, who...
- ❖ My role model is/used to be...
- ❖ One needs role models because...
- ❖ Does the modern man need role models?

The topic encouraged the participants to discuss the lack of role models recognized by today's youth. Many people felt inclined to admit that it is a serious contemporary problem. We listened to stories of persons important to the participants; the stories of people who played important roles in their youth. Interestingly enough, they were usually grandparents, as well as parents. They provided excellent models for the young by preserving values such as respect for others, diligence, honesty, sincerity, etc.

Since it was out last meeting, I have prepared a number of affirmations for everyone to pick at the end of the class.

Workshops address the needs of adults, allowing them to use the “knowledge of life” constructed on the basis of past experiences that they carry within. They remind of the restructuring of experiences of obviously diverse character. Thanks to the workshops the participants learn more about themselves, other people, and the world. O. Czerniawska argues that the memory of the past discovered by telling a story (or writing a biography) reveals that which is invisible and immeasurable, but at the same time essential in shaping human life¹. It is my belief that this type of meetings allows for self-creation, self-presentation, getting to know one's strong and weak points better, and, last but not least, provides an opportunity to meet other people. The participants of the workshops strongly emphasised the last aspect while expressing their satisfaction with being able to get to know their neighbours from the district. They also declared their willingness to maintain and foster these relationships.

My experiences lead to the conclusion that seniors are interested in that which is directly related to themselves; that, which they have to struggle with every day. They want to learn how to function in the world in a more conscious way. They want to manage and constantly improve their own lives.

M. Malewski² – an unchallenged authority in andragogics – enumerates three essential aspects of learning:

- 1) learning is of a holistic nature, which is why cognition is related to identity,
- 2) learning is of an interactive and social nature and includes the socio-cultural context,
- 3) learning is an unlimited process.

Such understanding of the learning process changes the hitherto prevailing idea of knowledge as a collection of textbook statements and allows it to take on a personal aspect³. It is my opinion that as organizers (initiators) of various forms of late adulthood education we should bear in my mind that human beings have a bio-socio-cultural character and they are ingrained in the environment, in the broad sense, as well as their biographies. That is why the education of seniors should be organized in such a way as to provide its participants with an opportunity for (self-)reflection on their lives, reinterpretation of experiences, better understanding of themselves, others, the world around them, sharing of emotions, achieving inner harmony, and constructing a wisdom of life.

¹ E. Dubas, *Biograficzność w oświacie dorosłych w ujęciu Olgi Czerniawskiej*, [in:] B. Juraś-Krawczyk, B. Śliwerski (ed.), *Pedagogiczne drogowskazy*, Kraków 2000.

² S. de Weerd, F. Corthouts, H. Martens, R. Bouwen, *Developing Professional Learning Environments: Model and Application*, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 2000, Issue 24(1), [qtd. in:] M. Malewski, 2007, *W poszukiwaniu teorii uczenia się ludzi dorosłych*, [in:] T. Aleksander, D. Barwińska (ed.), *Stan i perspektywy rozwoju refleksji nad edukacją dorosłych*, Kraków – Radom 2007, p. 54.

³ Ibid., p. 54.

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Supplement: Syllabus of the "Learning from Life and One's Own Biography" workshops

Class 1

Topic: "The meaning of friendship in life"

Aims:

- Shaping the ability to talk about one's own biography,
- Developing the ability to recall memories,
- Supporting reflection,
- Developing creative thinking,
- Developing group communication skills,
- Overcoming shyness,
- Developing active listening,
- Generating positive energy.

Materials used:

- Name cards (see: annex),
- Cards (see: annex),
- A box or a hat for the participants to draw the cards from,
- Pens,
- Chairs for all the participants, set up in a circle.

Workshop plan:

1. Participants sit in a circle. They receive the previously prepared name cards. They write their names in the boxes on the cards. They pass the cards to the persons sitting two places to the left. They are to write down the names of a few things attributed with the name on the card (features of character, a colour, a season of the year, an animal, a plant). The following stage of the activity is to present the name's connotations to the group and to confront the person who originally filled the card in.
2. The instructor introduces the topic of the class: "The meaning of friendship in life".
3. The group members pick cards related to "The meaning of friendship in life" out of the box or the hat. The instructor informs them that if they for whatever

reason do not like the card they had picked, they can put it back in the box/hat and draw a new one.

4. The instructor informs the group that they can provide whatever answer they feel inspired to by the card. The person who wants to address the topic starts the workshop. More people take turns to share their stories.
5. The instructor sums up the workshop, emphasising the diversity of the stories founded upon the various individual experiences of the participants of the class.

Class 2

Topic: "My educational path"

Aims:

- Shaping the ability to talk about one's own biography,
- Developing the ability to recall memories,
- Supporting reflection,
- Developing creative thinking,
- Developing group communication skills,
- Overcoming shyness,
- Developing active listening,
- Generating positive energy.

Materials used:

- Cards (see: annex),
- A box or a hat for the participants to draw the cards from,
- Pens,
- Chairs for all the participants, set up in a circle.

Workshop plan:

1. The instructor introduces the topic of the class: "My educational path".
2. The group members pick cards related to their educational paths out of the box or the hat. The instructor informs them that if they for whatever reason do not like the card they had picked, they can put it back in the box/hat and draw a new one.
3. The instructor informs the group that they can provide whatever answer they feel inspired to by the card. The person who wants to address the topic starts the workshop. More people take turns to share their stories.
4. The instructor sums up the workshop, emphasising the diversity of the stories founded upon the various individual experiences of the participants of the class.

Class 3

Topic: "Do we need role models nowadays? On the meaning of following a 'master' in life".

Aims:

- Shaping the ability to talk about one's own biography,
- Developing the ability to recall memories,
- Supporting reflection,
- Developing creative thinking,
- Developing group communication skills,
- Overcoming shyness,
- Developing active listening,
- Generating positive energy.

Materials used:

- Cards (see: annex),
- A box or a hat for the participants to draw the cards from,
- Pens,
- Chairs for all the participants, set up in a circle.

Workshop plan:

1. The instructor introduces the topic of the class: "Do we need role models nowadays? On the meaning of following a 'master' in life".
2. The group members pick cards related to role models out of the box or the hat. The instructor informs them that if they for whatever reason do not like the card they had picked, they can put it back in the box/hat and draw a new one.
3. The instructor informs the group that they can provide whatever answer they feel inspired to by the card. The person who wants to address the topic starts the workshop. More people take turns to share their stories.
4. The instructor sums up the workshop, emphasising the diversity of the stories founded upon the various individual experiences of the participants of the class.
5. The participants draw cards with affirmations from the hat/box.

Annex:

Examples of cards:

Topic: "The meaning of friendship in life".

To be friends is to...

What is important to me in friendship...

I could never make friends with...

In friendship I value...

Topic: "My educational path".

What taught me the most about life was...
Education is...
A person’s educational path is...
A person learns by...
Why we should study throughout our entire lives.

Topic: "Do we need role models nowadays? On the meaning of following a 'master' in life".

One can gain respect by...
A role model is a person, who...
My role model is/used to be...
One needs role models because...
Does the modern man need role models?

Name cards:

- FEATURES OF CHARACTER
- COLOUR
- A SEASON OF THE YEAR
- AN ANIMAL
- A PLANT

Affirmations for the participants:

I celebrate my ability to create my own
life. I celebrate life.

Our only duty is to save our dreams.
It is easy for me to do great things.

I know the answers to all my questions.
The answers lie within me.

I'm here, I'm not in a hurry, and I'm
doing what is most important for me.

Life recreates and renews my body,
every cell in my body is perfect.

Success is my divine fate.
I walk through life with self-awareness
and enthusiasm.

My body and my mind are free
of illness. I am healthy.

I deserve all the good I receive every
day.
All my dreams are fulfilled.

My mind is occupied with creative
ideas only. I consciously give up all
the other ones.

Every cell in my body is filled with
purifying, healing, strengthening light.

Love for everything that enriches and
fills my life.

I have an important role in the life
of my planet.