

The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative

Museums are traditionally characterised by their way of working and not by their purpose. The public are not surprised that museums in general collect, preserve and display traces of art and history. The way museums produce is however not the same as the aim or purpose of museums. The role of museums in their community - local, national or even global - may differ but the museums way of working somehow supports or stimulate the aims and as always easiest to understand on some years distance.

Cultural history museums have often been established as a tool for defining identity. Museums are traditionally very good at that - if they were no good they would not have existed for the last hundred fifty years where they not least served for example creation of popular nationalism. That was the case a hundred and a hundred fifty years ago for many Western and Northern European museums and we see that aim re-invented and making museums flourish in many parts of Eastern Europe today.

Especially in Northern and Western Europe we have seen museums having new aims and museums has used their learning capacity for people to engage in learning activities which may use of art and heritage as tools for new outcomes¹. One such aim has been directed towards social engagement. The demographic development has stimulated initiatives with relation to many different groupings. One of the defined groupings has been older adults where we since the 1970s find many different initiatives among European museums.

Since 2010 has the Nordic Centre of Heritage Learning & Creativity (NCK) – a research entity owned by museums and archives in the Nordic and Baltic countries – has followed this development in Europe and launched The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative². With inspiration from Tom Schuller and David Watson and their work on learning in later life and the educational theoretical perspectives interpreted by Peter Jarvis NCK set out to understand the dynamics in traditional as well as new approaches in the meeting between museums and older adults³. In the following I will present an overview of the research done under The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative so far.

NCK has focused on developments under four headings: genealogy, oral history, volunteering and reminiscence. In these areas NCK has through its owners – archives and museums – conducted experiments and related the outcomes to reflections on documented activities in museums all over Europe, even though predominantly in the North. The

¹ Jacoba Sraml Conzáles, *"Trends in Practical Heritage Learning. Study in Europe in 2012 Report"*, NCK 2013 – www.nckkultur.org

² Henrik Zipsane, "Heritage Learning in service of the memories and life quality of senior citizens", in Weiyuan Zhang, Young Chien Ming Enoch, Dorothy Cheung, May Lau and Duan Chenggui (ed) *"International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning"*, Volume 3, Issue 2, The University of Hong Kong – Hong Kong 2011.

³ Tom Schuller & David Watson, *"Learning through life. Inquiry into the future for lifelong learning"*. Leicester, UK: NIACE – National Institute of Adult Continuing Education 2009 and Peter Jarvis, *"Towards a comprehensive theory of human learning"*. Volume 1 of *Lifelong learning and the learning society*. London & New York: Routledge 2006.

important thing here is that The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative covers both the Third and the Fourth Ages. The initiative uses heritage in learning processes and is addressing real challenges in the community with aims that are respected politically. As the NCK has tested different approaches and methods and examined the processes and results in academic studies, the best practices have been moving from discovery to perfection. The examples show both depth and breadth and are targeted towards older adults in differing life-situations. But the level of engagement and especially the will for more strategic commitment and involvement varies a lot between heritage institutions. In this aspect, European cooperation and comparison is fundamental: for the development of new methods and approaches, joint activities and programmes and for the sake of inspiration, reflection and discussion. We see a great need for new European networks that are related to the issues raised. But there are also other obstacles for reaching the full potential of heritage institutions in their work with older adult learning. Today, many museums work in what could be described as a policy vacuum. The EU policies and recommendations are still not keeping pace with recent developments within the heritage sector and on a national level we see a scattered landscape of actions and policy-development, ranging from very ambitious to non-existing. Museums have thus, for the most part, taken on the challenge of the ageing population without back-up from political stake-holders.

NCK has seen how many museums that engage in older adult learning have developed strong connections to the health sector, thereby extending local networks, reaching new groups and, hopefully, in the long run, exploring ways to cut public spending on health and welfare. But for museums to go in this direction they need encouragement and support, both on local and national policy level. Heritage institutions need to know that their actions are valued and considered important. However, museums also have a responsibility to show political stakeholders what they do, how they do it and explain why it is important. Authorities at all political levels must be introduced to activities where heritage in its broadest meaning is made accessible and relevant for older adults. Heritage can offer learning opportunities for older adults with very diverse sets of interests and experience. But in all examples of programmes and activities we have seen, older adults are also great assets to the museums. They are people whom, by sharing their memories, time and enthusiasm, enrich the sector and make our institutions keep on learning⁴.

In The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative it has been clear that some museums are very successful and trying to provide both social inclusion and learning and commercial activities aimed at older people. This is not least seen in museums with activities which are largely driven by volunteer engagement. The distinction is primarily made between members of the community who can benefit from participating in programmes and activities aimed at groups of older people and tourists coming from other places who are considered a target group you can profit from. This distinction is also reflected in activities for other age-groups. Together with other activities museums can offer experience, knowledge and feelings of how life used to be for older people in different historical periods and thereby stimulate attitudes based on understanding, respect and cohesion. The increasing number of older people is an asset to society and a target group that the heritage sector must address. It

⁴ Sara Grut, " *Heritage and the Ageing Population* ", The Learning Museum Network Project, edited by Ann Nicholls, Manuela Pereira and Margherita Sani, Regione Emilia-Romagna 2013.

is clearly a developing market for the kind of activities that are striving for learning and social cohesion; but older people are also an important target group for commercial activities, both to show what older people's lives have been like in the past and for senior citizens as important paying visitors⁵.

In 2012 NCK through The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative for the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities on Lifelong Learning (EARLALL) set up a working group on lifelong learning and the ageing population. During 2012-2013 a handful of regions in Europe arranged seminars where participants from local and regional authorities, universities and civic society discussed the following with regard to what was called *life engagement for older adults*. Our questions for the discussions were the following:

Who are the local and regional stakeholders, **how** do they work and **what** do they offer in the cases mentioned below:

1. Physical and mental health and well-being of older adults
2. Competence preservation and development of older adults
3. Social life and community participation of older adults
4. Social and financial security and independence of older adults
5. Use and transference of individual and social life experiences of older adults.

The participating regions were Rhineland-Pfalz (Germany), Baden-Württemberg (Germany), Provincia di Livorno (Italy), Durham County (UK) and Jämtland-Härjedalen (Sweden).

The seminars produced notes and, in some cases, even more formal minutes. The overall impression was that there is a great similarity between the regions and their connection to their use of the welfare society as a role model. The differences are primarily visible in relation to what are considered private and public responsibilities and resources. The dominating structure seems to be that there are public stakeholders who take responsibility for the social and financial security and independence of older adults. These public stakeholders are only complemented by private stakeholders to a small extent – for instance about the health and well-being, competence preservation and social life and community participation of older adults. The differences between the regions are mostly concerned with the level of ambition in the services offered to older adults, which also reflects differences in family or household patterns and traditions.

Most important from the perspective of The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative was that it looks as if only heritage institutions like museums and archives and local heritage associations take any real responsibility for or show interest in the use and transference of the individual and social experiences of older adults. In Provincia di Livorno and in Rhineland-Pfalz, there may be private employers who include older adults as part of their staff policy. However, this may often be just as much for financial reasons as for reasons of competence. In Durham County and in Provincia di Livorno they also mention the

⁵ Anna Hansen & Henrik Zipsane, "Older people as a developing market for cultural heritage sites", *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, Volume 20, Issue 1, Manchester University Press, Spring 2014.

intergenerational use of older adults in compulsory school education. Older adults may act as 'grandfather/grandmother' figures in the classroom or in the schoolyard, where their visible maturity has a calming effect on the children and contributes to their sense of feeling secure and safe during school. Overall, the regional studies point clearly to efforts made in the context of heritage institutions, and their exclusive way of making room for the development of the individuals' experiences in museum visits throughout their entire life course. The ways in which museums play a key role in these efforts generally involve voluntary activities of all kinds and different kinds of memory-based activities such as reminiscence work. In a broad sense, both the volunteering work and the reminiscence work involve the use of *history* in their approach to the development of older adult's life time competences⁶.

With life time competences we refer to the knowledge, skills and attitudes which develop through a lifetime based on experiences and biological development. Such competences are personal but there are commonalities between people because of similar structures in life time schedules. After all, we all go through similar phases in our biological development and even in our social lives. It seems pretentious to use a word like wisdom to characterise these specific competences. The life time competences can't really be valued or even assessed as such. They are simply there!

Life time competences are already today of great interest to memory organisations such as museums and archives. Many are the older adults who help with identification of long forgotten motives in photo collections and many older adults have preserved competences from different crafts which seem obsolete today. Preservation of some crafts has become dependent on competences which was taught and learned decades ago by now older adults. Museum professionals may be especially tempted to think of carpenters, blacksmiths and other crafts of the like but the same goes for nurses, teachers and even office assistants such as secretaries. Remember that not many are able to type more than 100 signs per minute today or use all ten fingers when typing.

However, life time competences are not only about memories in the form of knowledge or skills from the past. Attitudes are as important but less explored. In fact, I am sure that we all have experienced older relatives with "strange" attitudes which become visible in specific circumstances. Nevertheless, it should not be any surprise that attitudes also relate to everything from character of fostering in childhood to continued development of convictions and behaviour throughout adulthood. The life time competences carried and kept by older adults are interesting in several ways and in the meeting point between the older adults and heritage organisations such competences are given exceptional value for both ⁷.

Volunteering in museums and archives is such an example. From the perspective of the heritage organisation the older adult is representing a direct contact to a recent past. From

⁶ Tine Fristrup & Henrik Zipsane, "Lifelong Learning through Heritage. Capacity Building for Re-engagement in later Life", Östersund - NCK 2018 in print.

⁷ Anna Hansen & Henrik Zipsane, "Older people as a developing market for cultural heritage sites", *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, Volume 20, Issue 1, Manchester University Press, Spring 2014.

the perspective of the older adult the heritage organisation represents the demand for the specific life time competences. The heritage organisation grows with achieving and preserving new memories and the older adult grows as she or he feels valued. At the same time the heritage organisation provides a place for a potential social setting. As older adults engage as volunteers they help making that place a setting for socialising with others. The heritage organisations – when successful - are almost archetypical places to stimulate self-directed-learning. The self-directed-learning is probably today the most prominent phenomenon in adult learning, as this quote reveals: *“In some respects, this emergence of SDL has been a reaction against the overly-prescriptive character of formal education where tight curricula, teacher domination and sometimes rigid assessment practices have resulted in alienation of adults, particularly older people”* ⁸.

Nevertheless, this represents an ideal perception and a meeting on equal terms with a transaction formed by demand and supply should be the case. Indeed, in many archives and museums that is what’s happening every day. Therefore, being in a museum or an archive should be and when successful is a form of time travel for the individual older adult when dealing with times covered by the personal life span⁹.

The Senior Citizens Heritage Learning Initiative has so far shown that the heritage organisations and the older adults has very much to gain from engaging with each other. There is however still a lack of awareness especially politically around this which explains why little resources is invested in stimulating for example museums and archives to engage. Many museums in Europe has today their impact and success measured in visitor numbers. In the future we need to measure in among other things the amount of efforts to attract real engagement from and impact on older adults.

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⁸ Brian Findsen & Marvin Formosa; *“Lifelong Learning in Later Life. A Handbook on Older Adult Learning”*, Sense Publishers – Rotterdam-Boston-Tapei 2011.

⁹ Henrik Zipsane, *“Life Time Competences and Time Travelling”*, in *‘The Time Traveling Method – in the Service of Society and it’s Development’* edited by Ebbe Westergreen & Gustav Wollentz, Kalmar 2018.