3 Older adults informal learning in the community: Snapshots from research

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3.1 Introduction

It is widely accepted that informal learning is often preferred by older adults, when compared to formal education and even with non-formal learning. It has also been known for many years that much adult learning takes place outside schools or other formal settings. In fact, there is literally no life context that does not provide informal learning in the diversity of forms it seems to include. We learn at the workplace, with our families and friends, and in the various situations we encounter daily in the community – either we are conscious about it and look for it intentionally, or we do it naturally and do not even think about it, and thus for many people informal learning simply appears as part of their lived experience. On the other hand, the worlds of non-formal and formal learning or education are seen differently due to the institutions that promote it. Institutional frames present very visible marks and symbols that people have long associated as indicating "learning" or "education". It is therefore natural that informal learning is often not valued nor recognised.

However, informal learning is still all around us, and thus influencing many dimensions of our lives, even if the amount of research focusing on informal learning remains relatively small. McGivney (2006) explains the reasons for this under-representation in educational research: first, informal learning is often unplanned and incidental, and therefore not recognised as learning; second, due to its diversity it is impossible to evaluate with precision the full extent of informal learning. Finally, "learning is often not the primary motive for engaging in an activity; the motive is the activity itself" (McGivney, 2006, p. 13). As such, researchers into informal learning face a series of challenges, some methodological and some pragmatic.

I have been researching community education and community development in Portugal for some years now, with these often treated as subfields of adult education (Canário, 2013). In southern Portugal I was able to analyse community development interventions going back to 1985 and follow them across time. In this chapter I will try to show the centrality of informal learning in these community intervention processes, and the role of older adult learning in it.

In 2010 the first meeting of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) network on Education and Learning of Older Adults was held in Munich, where I met Sabina Jelenc Krašovec. Conferences are usually spaces where we build relationships that mould the future. Influenced by the work of Barry Golding (who was also in Munich) and colleagues, we soon shared two research projects: Older Men as Active Learners in the Community (OMAL) and Old Guys Say Yes to Community[1]. In this text we will start by describing and analysing some central traits of community intervention projects in Portugal. Next, we will turn to the results of the OMAL project. These two parts of the chapter will hopefully show the centrality of informal learning and its importance to the lives of older adults.

3.2 Snapshots from community projects in Portugal: the invisible older learners

Community education as a concept is very difficult to define in a precise manner (Edwards et al., 2013) for several reasons. First, because many forms of community intervention are related to education, even if influenced by different traditions and therefore having different focuses. Community development, community action or community organisation represent some of these traditions, naturally appropriated by educators according to the features of their own national or regional contexts, political trends and having as backgrounds changing historical moments. Second, the conceptual origins of community education grew apart from formal education but were inspired by two old traditions (Tett, 2010): one coming from the radical working-class organisations, which developed popular educational activities through existing networks of support and solidarity. The second one comes from the philanthropic provision of education in communities for poor, working-class adults and young people. The result is that community education includes a wide range of social practices, purposes and meanings, not only because of its various origins, but also due to the multiple factors that make educators print their own interpretations of it according to the context.

We have to begin by making explicit some of the characteristics of the community intervention practices we analysed in southern Portugal. We are talking about intensive work with isolated rural communities with many significant needs,[2] al-

1 The Portuguese results of the Old Guys project are not so important to informal learning and so we will not include them in this chapter.

2 Various problems with regard to basic infrastructure, such as roads and public transportation, which made social and geographical isolation a problem; a very low level of literacy among the focal population; difficult access to health care, especially problematic for the older adults; difficult access to kindergartens and schools; a low level

though benefitting from an unusual situation: the funding coming from private foundations was followed by funding from EU programmes such as LEADER, and this assured a continuity of the action over time.

The main inspiration for these community interventions came from participatory research (Park, 2001). The features coming from a Portuguese version of popular education applied to community development were the following (Fragoso, 2009, 2011): (a) A bottom-up intervention in which the problems of communities were the basis for the engagement of informal groups of the population, who worked side-by-side with activists and adult educators to envisage opportunities for increasing the quality of life of people. (b) The participation of the population was crucial for attaining conscientisation processes (Freire, 1987, 1997) that showed people change was possible. In this sense, the progressive results obtained via action were the fuel that widened collective participatory dynamics. (c) Although training was important to create new skills (for example, to support the creation of local women's micro-enterprises that could be sustainable), non-formal and especially informal aspects of learning were determinant factors in improving people's organisational capacity and building the community structures that could ensure their future, independent action. (d) Although the action was initiated by civil society organisations external to the territory, there was an explicit attempt to create conditions for the focal population groups to assume the full control of the processes. This was done by guaranteeing that all the phases of the processes were controlled by the local population, including decision-making, and via informal learning that focused on the organisational skills of those involved in the action.

The ultimate intention of these community processes was not only to improve the quality of life of the population, but also to try to stop the intense migration of the younger generation to coastal cities, looking for education and employment opportunities. These aims marked the focus of the community intervention, and special attention was given (Fragoso, 2009), on the one hand, to the young adults and adults that needed an economic activity to be able to stay in their communities; and in the other hand, to women from a double perspective. First, creating educational structures that allowed them to be free of childcare duties, leaving time to start an economic activity; second, developing non-formal training programmes to promote women's self-employment. These training programmes required special attention to the non-technical aspects of learning, using mediation and strong support intended to give the women confidence to endure the patriarchal reaction

of economic activity among women, who were thus condemned to the traditional gender roles and trapped in the household and rural family property, the care of children and older adults, etc.

of the communities. After some years, there were indeed significant changes in the gender power relationships in these communities as a consequence of the non-formal training programmes and the overall community intervention processes, as reported in Fragoso and Ollagnier (2016).

For the purposes of this chapter it is important to stress a main conclusion from these community interventions: although non-formal learning was important to improve technical skills and create some employment, informal learning was really the backbone of the action. For example, it was through informal learning that it was possible to convince local groups to cooperate with the team that initiated the process. It was via a combination of informal and non-formal learning that women were empowered to assume relevant roles in their communities, at various levels. It was informal learning that made it possible that local social actors, some years after the action started, begun to organise, by themselves, various important activities. It was informal learning that promoted the building of some local associations, created by people who had been connected with the first phase projects. As stated by Fragoso (2014), they learnt how to work together, organise themselves, divide tasks, search for the key information needed, reach out to other institutions that might bring them funding possibilities or other advantages, discuss their options and make decisions accordingly, and so on. On the one hand, we can argue that this informal learning was capable of promoting individual skills and knowledge clearly applicable to a number of everyday situations. On the other hand, there was a clear intentionality to make this learning an asset to the collective, to the community. This type of informal learning in the community has been discussed by other researchers in community settings, such as Mündel and Schugurensky (2008). This informal learning resulted in very significant learning, and not just unintentional or unconscious learning, as often informal learning is defined. This is in line with Brookfield's (1986) statement that most community action initiatives tend to have a robust educative dimension, in that adults are involved in a continuous process of developing skills, knowledge and reflecting on their experience. But most times, its origin is informal learning.

Considering the features of such interventions, where were the older adults and what was the role of their learning within the community processes? Clearly, older adults were not a priority in these interventions. It was only five years after the action started that a specific association looked for the first time at the appalling living conditions of older adults. They often lived in houses that were far from any neighbours, struggling with deep isolation and solitude (most of their sons and daughters had left to find work either in other areas of Portugal or in other European countries) and

poor infrastructure, which made mobility difficult, and the majority did not have access to health care. In these conditions it was natural that the first action was to build a daycare centre and later a residential home to provide at least the basic care needed to enable a more dignified old age. We should add that this was not only a local problem, as a demographic study carried out in Portugal about ten years ago showed that more than 1.2 million older adults live alone (400,964) or in the exclusive company of other older adults (804,577) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012) – and this tendency has presumably only worsened in the years since. But still the fact remains that the community interventions focused on the basic dimensions of life for older citizens, such as guaranteeing access to health services, home-services to help those still living independently but with some limitations due to age, and combating loneliness via some community programmes. There were also some attempts to build literacy programmes for older adults (run by volunteers), but with a very limited success and reaching only small numbers of individuals.

In short, learning was not considered in this context. At a national level, the policy of promoting mere assistance (although based on "control at distance" by contracting civil society institutions to act on behalf of the State) and creating services to deal with the more visible consequences of ageing has rooted and developed. The growth in the number of shared spaces and services of different natures (residential homes, continued care services, or similar, as provided by community, private, religious or health institutions) shows this tendency clearly: Gonçalves (2003) reported 2,339 of such places in 1991, rising to 3,876 in 2001 (an increase of 61%) and to 4,832 in 2011 (an increase of 80%). And in 2017, the number of such services reached 7,300 (Carta Social, 2017), which represents an increase of 51%. The negative growth of the Portuguese population continues to cause the abandonment of rural areas, and the facilities and infrastructure in such areas are declining in both number and quality number (Pereirinha & Murteira, 2016), and struggle with various problems. In this broad context, community development projects can make a difference, creating better conditions for those living in the area, but such actions are powerless with regard to the ageing dynamics of such communities. It seems, also, that education and learning are the last things we think of when the general living conditions of a certain group call for more obvious kinds of action-assistance, even if the merits of such prioritising are arguable.

This means that on the one hand older adults were not considered when it comes to nonformal learning, because the main objectives of these non-formal programmes and projects were the creation of skills and competences that could be applied to work settings and the attainment of gender equality. On the other hand, a very

substantial part of the intentional informal learning was aimed the improvement of community organisation, and that meant working with the same social actors that were already engaged in other community processes. One way or another, older adults were excluded from these processes in a non-intentional way. Older adults who needed assistance were thus seen with a feeling of urgency due to their poor living standards that seemed to require more services and basic measures. The only aim of this action was restoring their dignity as human beings, and learning was not – perhaps understandably – included in it.

3.3 Snapshots from the OMAL project: beyond the invisible learners

The OMAL[3] project was a very modest one that allowed only minimal, exploratory research. Even so, there were very interesting exploratory results on older men's learning in the community considering various analytical dimensions (see Radovan & Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). Each partner chose two case studies of community learning experiences in environments where men outnumbered women. We chose an amateur fishing club in southern Portugal, and the case of retired fishermen working in the docks.

Although the fishing club we analysed (Fragoso et al., 2014) was indeed an amateur one, we were surprised by the number of trophies they had accumulated in regional, national and international competitions, with several podium places in world cups, for example. This suggests training and learning with regard to fishing techniques for a variety of age groups, which they did with a clear intention, conscience of what did they wanted to achieve – and yet informally. A significant part of this learning was done via social tournaments they organised in which the oldest members frequently participated, but also young adults and children. Via these shared experiences people learned specific knowledge and fishing skills that were successfully used. This practical hands-on learning had the collective in its centre and also an important component of inter-generational learning. For centuries an important part of the transfer of knowledge, skills, competencies, norms and values between generations has occurred within families. Recently, transformations in family models and roles displaced this family-based learning to a secondary place (Kump & Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). But in this case, we see a community dynamic that restored this form of intergenerational learning.

3 Project 2012-1-SI1-GRU06-04019 2, funded by the Lifelong learning programme (Learning Partnerships), Older Men as Active Learners in the Community (OMAL). Coordinator: University of Ljubljana (Slovenia). Partners: University of Algarve (Portugal), Dingli Local Council (Malta), University of Tallinn (Estonia).

Older adults in this club were fundamental at various levels: they were the ones who managed the club and were active in every activity, including the social ones. Here we cannot take socialisation out of the informal learning equation, because despite being unintentional and unconscious, it was shown to be central in more than one way. First, the club facilities include a bar and a social space open to everybody from early morning to night. Our naturalistic observations done in distinct periods of the day show that socialisation occurs between people of all ages, constituting an important resource to the increasing of social networks of the older adults. This is important as we know from research the importance of combating shrinking social networks and loneliness (Paúl & Ribeiro, 2009). Second, specific non-fishing groups were regular customers and used the club facilities to spend time, mostly around games (for example, a group of young adults and adults who were unemployed, or a large group of retired policemen). These findings show the central importance of socialisation, which is easier in a space for informal gatherings where older adults can socialise, talk, exchange opinions, and engage in leisure time activities (Jelenc Krašovec et al., 2014).

The second case of the OMAL project focused on a smaller number of older fishermen who for decades used to work in boats that were at sea for months at a time, then retired from this and returned to work in the docks (Fragoso et al., 2014). The first interesting point in this case is the centrality of informal learning at the workplace. The older men stated that what they had learned in formal terms was not enough to be fishermen. It was the everyday struggle at sea and the relationships with their fellow fishermen that taught them. In a boat one learns primarily through practice, and by observing one's older or more experienced co-workers. In this sense what the older adults expressed via their stories was that learning was crucial for their own survival as the work was very hard, sometimes physically exhausting. Moreover, they stated that during such work they were dependent on one another – if one man did not do his job properly then everybody would be in danger. There is no doubt that the purpose of this learning is collective, whilst the daily working activities help develop a number of individual specific skills and knowledge. There is also no doubt that a significant part of such learning is intentional and conscious.

One could argue that these type of environments (a boat with the same crew for months in a row) build a community with its own rules: these men share a language with specific meanings associated with a multitude of words, some technical, some created in a very specific form of socialisation; they share working principles and rules that must not be broken in order to assure everybody's safety on board;

they share a different type of communication that does not always need many words to be effective and relies substantially on postures and non-verbal communication; they share a prevalent notion of danger that is perhaps real and creates at the same time a sense of union in ways unparalleled to that possible in regular life "on dry land". The bonds among these men are therefore very strong, not always conscious, and this has an influence on the motives that lead them back to work. To sum up, it seems these men built over time a *different* community that represents a *symbolic space* (Kurantowicz, 2008) that frames a powerful sense of belonging.

The motives that caused the decision to retire from a life at sea were more or less common: coming to a certain age where the physical demands were too much, they missed their families and spent years with the feeling of being absent, and so on. As for the motives for going back to work six days a week in the docks, we found two were salient. First, this research was conducted at a time when the consequences of the financial crisis were still very deep in Portugal, and thus some men went back to work to help their sons and daughters who were unemployed. The second motive has to do with the characteristics of the community they built while working at sea – which was very different from the community they found when they retired. Away from the sea, most of these men had trouble finding their place. Their "new" communities' function with very different rules from the ones they used to live in. There are, of course, specific places where retired fishermen have their refuges and meet every day. But their true community is made of their former co-workers (although they do not express it using such terms). It thus made sense for them to return to work, in order to once again find a community with which they share symbolic meanings they have built up during a lifetime of work.

3.4 Conclusion

The cases we reported in this chapter allow us to state that informal learning is no doubt central for the lives of older adults, as we can see also by the literature in the field. Research demonstrates that older adults are a very diverse population, having different learning and social needs and abilities, and that only a few percent of the older population participate in formal and non-formal learning (Schmidt-Hertha et al., 2014). The community level is crucial for the social life of older adults. "When the radius of action becomes more limited also in a geographic sense, the local surrounding gets more and more important and becomes the most important resource of areas of action, learning opportunities, and intergenerational encounters" (Formosa et al., 2014b, pp. 207–208). Informal learning offers great potential

for re-establishing personal ties, creating and maintaining social cohesion in the community, and influencing co-operation, collaboration, and trust (Formosa et al., 2014a). Informal learning can result in the better quality of life and improved well-being of older adults (Jelenc Krašovec et al., 2014), and can contribute to reducing the exclusion of older people (Jelenc Krašovec & Kump, 2009).

In the cases we described there is evidence of various types of informal learning, as defined by Schugurensky (2000), including self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialisation. Self-directed learning is intentional and conscious; incidental learning is unintentional but conscious; learning acquired through socialisation (usually values, attitudes, and dispositions) is often unintentional and unconscious. This basically means that these three forms of informal learning rest upon two criteria, intentionality and awareness. However, intentionality and awareness are not easy to identify. This is a limitation of this text in that we cannot guarantee the validity of all our statements, as the subjectivity of the interpretation processes can be complex. To what extent are researchers interpreting the basis of certain knowledge and skills correctly remains an open question. Moreover, when we are giving credit to informal learning as yielding the development of certain skills it could be that we are simply forgetting other sources – formal or non-formal. It is difficult to connect all the dots of human experience and the relationships between types of learning may be more complex than we are prepared to admit. This relates to two of the points identified by McGivney (2006) as relevant questions that should be pursued by research regarding informal learning, namely: "what is the relationship between a person's informal and formal learning and to what extent do they enrich or extend each other?" (p. 21). As researchers we often work within specific time-frames, while some experiences that people have can go back – unconsciously – a number of years, making these complex relationships more or less impenetrable. After all, research is not a magic formula to access to all worlds of human experience. Nevertheless, it is a fact that informal learning is under-researched. We thus need more research projects specifically designed to understand informal learning and build an agenda that can be followed systematically in the future.

We want to stress that community spaces are ideal to research informal learning, free from some typical disadvantages and biases of the institutions of formal education. The community is equally important if we are interested in promoting older adult learning in general, and understanding the dynamics of participation and social learning (Jelenc Krašovec & Gregorčič, 2017). Socialisation is a basic form of informal learning, and its importance is widely recognised, and seems to be one of

the main motives that lead older adults to meet and perform a wide range of activities and thus combat some of the natural effects of ageing. However, we need to make this option for informal learning clearer and embrace the idea that we can plan informal learning in the community. This is a task for community organisations and workers, and we find some useful recommendations in Mündel and Schugurensky (2008): for example, community organisations can foster learning by creating appropriate informal activities that allow the development of particular skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

To conclude, we are not arguing that informal community spaces are the only ones that can frame older adult's learning. Just to give an example, the movement of universities of the third age presents interesting alternatives. There is also an extensive literature discussing this issue and debating the pros and cons of the mainstream models we find in such institutions. We know from previous research that in Portuguese universities of the third age there is a strong predominance of middle-class, highly educated women, and at least a significant part of these organisations is pedagogically close to traditional formal education models (Veloso, 2011). This can be problematic for those who had bad school experiences in the past or prefer less structured activities and learning. Moreover, Formosa (2012) reviewing the issue stated that many such European organisations incorporate strong gender, social class, ageist and ethnic biases. Having said this, we recognise that universities of the third age provide a very important service to older adults in general. In this sense, diversity will always be the best way to guarantee that learning goes on later in life, since older adults are, by definition, diverse in interests and non-homogenous.

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