

WCES 2014

## Elderly People Communication in Literature Learning Environment

Jurate Sucylaite<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*University of Klaipeda, H. Manto street, 84, Klaipeda, Lithuania*

---

### Abstract

Oldest people (80 – 88 years old) attended the project “Education in Language Arts for Health”. Their communication was studied in natural literature learning environment and analyzed via qualitative research. Research allowed confirming that wounded dignity, low self-evaluation and loneliness can be transformed into community feeling and into active willingness to participate in life. Reading the poems of nature themes, discussion based on clients’ personal meanings, listening to stories and storytelling, writing with focus on senses liberates creativity, improves the skills of communication and self- esteem.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCES 2014

*Keywords:* elderly learning, literature, transformative learning, poetry therapy, communication, self - esteem

---

### 1. Introduction

Ageing has impact on all aspects of human life: on social, psychological, biological. The World Health Organization (2002) has proposed model of active ageing based on optimizing opportunities for health, participation in order to enhance quality of life. Learning plays an important role in active ageing: life long learning enables elderly people to maintain the quality of their lives by enhancing their self – reliance, self – sufficiency and coping areas of physical health and social relationship; helps to develop wisdom (Boulton –Lewis, 2010, Goldman, 2005). Important effects of learning are: enjoyment of life, feeling about life, satisfaction with life, increased social involvement (Dench, Regan, 2000). Elderly are motivated to learn for reasons of self - fulfillment (Boulton – Lewis, Kuys, Lowie Kitchin, 2006), but often their initiative depends how other people evaluate their skills. Old people should emancipate themselves from all forms of domination and free their own possibilities for the last stage of life

---

\* Jurate Sucylaite. Tel.: +4-345-777-8-654.

E-mail address: [sucylaite@yahoo.com](mailto:sucylaite@yahoo.com)

(Battersby, 1987; Moody, 1993; Maderer and Skiba, 2006). Strom, Fournet (2006) on the basis of Cattell's theory of fluid – crystallized intelligence told that cognitive stability and decline are associated with age. Fluid intelligence represents the mechanics of information processing, including memory capacity, speed of response, and decrements of these functions have been found by the age of 67 years, but the losses remain modest until age 80 (Baltes, Dittman-Kohli and Kliegl, 1986). Crystallized intelligence consists of the cultural or pragmatic knowledge that people acquire through language, social interaction and observation of strategies and remain stable. The protective effect of education on prevalence of dementia has been a consistent finding of independent studies (Strom, Fournet and other, 2006). Reality is an intersubjective phenomenon that is constructed through conversation among people, and problems can be solved through conversation (Faber, 2004). A sense of purpose and meaning is rooted in mutually satisfying relationship with family members and friends, and is tied with language. Our empirical data showed that old people experience a lack of verbal communication, loneliness, often they are depressed, and negative emotions block their creativity. Before this educational project we assumed that elderly people will liberate self-confidence, dignity and possibilities to live easier, resisting old age; literature learning environment will give a chance to tell existential truth slant, to enrich clients' emotions, and to encourage them for deep unique conversations. We thought that authentic communication will free everyone from problems determined system, and will improve quality of life. During educational process literature served as a catalyst in clients' and facilitator's interaction, encouraged to speak up, inspired to focus on personal meanings, and empowered clients to create, recreate own life story, communication deepened interaction with literature and improved aesthetic satisfying. Results of communication in literature learning environment were improved self-esteem, decreased sense of loneliness, a better understanding of his / her life.

Goal of this research to explore elderly people communication in literature learning environment

## **2. Method**

Public Health Bureau invited elderly to attend the project "Education in Language Arts for Health". All participants were volunteers and agreed to take part in our research. Before educational project and in the end of the project free informal interview was made with everyone participant having goal to explore qualities of each personality and find out meanings of their learning. All participants of our project were 80 years old and older women, widowed. 8 women had 8 sessions, 1 session per week. Duration of each session was 1.5 hour. During sessions different activities were combined: poetry reading, discussion and creative writing. Qualitative signs of used poetry were sense of nature, motives of homeland and agricultural works, meditative lyrics, universal existential themes, human glorification. Creative writing exercises required to focus on senses, or to liberate material from unconsciousness (acrostic writing). Discussion was based on personal meanings of participants, on participants' and literature hero's existential similarities. Facilitator summarized what group has learned in every session and strengthened hope. These educational methods represent interactive bibliotherapy / poetry therapy or transformative learning in language arts for transpersonal changes tradition. Method of phenomenological observation was used for data collection having goal to explore educational process: participants' communication and their activities, facilitator's methodical system in use. Grounded theory was used to generalize data.

## **3. Results**

### *3.1 Target group*

During first interview women confessed that they often feel a lack of energy and the resulting deterioration in the mood. On the other hand they emphasized on their efforts to resist old age, and on their social activities: they attended all lectures for third age people at university, and free cultural events in municipality library and other places. All of them liked literature, 3 of them admitted having writing and language arts teacher's experience. They willingly spoke about their profession, about the work carried out, and emphasized on its meaning: "I worked a lot", "I was very committed to the job", and "While working, I did not think about the salary, I worked in vocation", "It is painful that nobody wants us, now everyone thinks only about projects and money". After sharing their thoughts of work they expressed complaints about the loss of health, poverty and loneliness. Phenomenological observation let

to say that women often began to weep when they're talking about their work or loneliness. Their language was expressionless: intonations were few, simple words, sentences without phraseological saying or citations. Summarizing data it is possible to say that depressive symptoms were typical for this study group. Loss of social meaning is one of the factors causing depression. Poverty (pension is much less than the salary), deterioration of health related to aging, and over the last two decades big changes in Lithuanian people's values orientation, preference given to tangible values strengthened old women's feeling of social isolation.

*3.2 Self- doubt and inhibitions of emotions*

Women were sensitive listeners. They did not have experience to share memories, aroused by the poetry reading, so were disturbed hearing an invitation to share personal experiences. One of the participants spontaneously asked permission to read original her poem, most of them confessed that they have lost creativity, energy and health. Few of them told that they are forced to live in social isolation, so they are in low spirits, have low energy and are not able to think and to speak meaningfully. Teacher-facilitator gave her comment to the problem of social isolation: discussed on the relationship between low self – evaluation, mood and community feeling, encouraged participants to evaluate the Self, their human values, efforts to participate in social life, communication with others, and invited a volunteer to read a poem. Facilitator's speech strengthened clients' self-esteem, volunteer's reading had beauty – these agents let to release emotional tension and to experience positive emotions. After that it was easier to respond to facilitator's invitation to imagine the self in poetry hero's situation, to remember similar personal situations, and to share memories. Women were involved into creative game, they shared their memories. During speaking pauses occurred in their speech, sometimes they lacked words, sometimes it was possible to notice tears in their eyes, sometimes woman began to weep. They little were ashamed of the tears, but felt well enough: "Tears... yes, tears, but not bad tears". All group members tried to give emotional support one to another and were engaged in listening to stories. In the end of session teacher summarized the discussion, emphasizing that life exists in opposites, and everyone can turn to the beauty, and to discover vitality, and used stanzas of poems for this purpose. Women expressed opinion that they found the beauty of poetry, and told that teacher's voice was helpful. Summarizing data of phenomenological observation, it is possible to say that old women' thinking had a lack of flexibility, a lack of spontaneity, and was tied with inhibited or suppressed negative emotions, and connected with low self-image and self-evaluation. Sharing memories women confessed negative feelings as well as positive – it was a way to release tension and to relax; facilitator's given psychological existential knowledge and emotional support helped group members to become more open and easier interact with poetry and with each other. In table N.1 we present changes in elderly behaviour, occurred in literature learning environment.

Table 1. Transformations in literature learning environment

<b>Beginning of the session (input)</b>	<b>Facilitator's methods ( process)</b>	<b>The end of session (outcomes)</b>
Fear of novelty	Knowledge sharing Poetry readin	Discovery of poem's beauty
Complaining on lost creativity	Guided conversation	Tears in eyes (catharsis) Emotional support to other
Complaining on social isolation	Creative games, guided discussion	Storytelling and listening

*3.3 Self- expression and community feeling*

Women read poems, written by Lithuanian writers. These poems were created in fifth - the ninth decade of the last century, and only few were from our days. This poetry can be characterized by sense of nature and motives of homeland and agricultural works. All group members remembered their homeland and spoke about their houses, forests. In the third session pauses were noticed in women' speech associated with deeper inhale, and much more intonations than in speech of the first interview. Women were invited to write about their favourite land in the

classroom. Two women told that they have their collections of poetry and expressed a wish to read their poems; these women didn't want to write in our session. Other two women told that they are not professional writers as their colleagues, and told that they are glad having good poets in their group. Women - volunteers were asked to read their poems. After poetry reading the facilitator presented writing as a method of communication helpful to disclose feelings and thoughts, and to speak from within. Clients agreed to try writing. They complained about the lack of literary skills after invitation to read the created text, but agreed to read it out. They were very excited reading their texts: they inhaled loudly, sometimes for a moment hold their breath, some of the words was spoken aloud; one of women said that she has warmed reading the text. Old women confessed that they have strong desire to write nice and meaningful texts, so it was a challenge for them to accept writing as a game, to write acrostic spontaneously, and to use its words in coherent text. Acrostic writing let to use some experiences from unconsciousness level and consciously to find their personal meaning. Thanks acrostic writing women got a power to write about authentic things; group members listened deeply to every person's writing, and found that all of them write interesting. After writing about the bread and after reading this text aloud one woman told: "Wonders happen here. I could not write for more than half a year and I wrote here, - and added, - and it is very warm here". Her words were an opportunity to discuss the sense of community. At the end of each session women were thrilled when the facilitator read a poetical composition made of fragments of group members' texts. Summarizing it is possible to say that community feeling takes place, when a person has a chance to speak openly, and when he / she is able to experience, that other people are listening to him / her. Authentic speaking reduces negative emotions, improves self – evaluation and help to establish cordial relations with another man. In table N.2 we present relationship with the Self, transformations from low self-evaluation to courage to write or discovered creativity.

Table 2. Relationship with the Self in literature learning environment

<b>Beginning of the session (input)</b>	<b>Facilitator's methods ( process)</b>	<b>The end of session (outcomes)</b>
Critical evaluation of skills	Encouragement, sharing knowledge	Courage to try writing
Distrust, fear to try	Discussion, creative games	Discovered creativity
Expressionless language	Poem making and reading	Pauses, deep inhale during reading, excitement
The need for self- expression	Invitation to read own poem	Confirmation of the Self

Poem "I don't want to write poems", written by Lithuanian poet J. Degutyte, allowed to discuss about difficulties of human being, and about healing power of writing. Information gave more conscious understanding that everyone has a real life, difficulties, and everyone emotionally responds to the challenges; and sometimes emotional state is very difficult, but diary, poetry writing, talking to those, who are closed to you, interacting with nature help to survive. Existential knowledge inspired women to share, how do they survive, to discuss about poets' crises and ability to heal the Self and others. "Main thing is do not lose your dignity", - told one woman, other group members enthusiastically supported this idea. After sessions (starting from the third session) women didn't want to leave group and asked to read more poems. "We need your voice. When you read out a poem, poem has more beauty", "If we read this poem at home, we couldn't experience such powerful beauty", - they told. Summarizing data of phenomenological observation it is possible to say that facilitator helps to find inner connection between poetry aesthetic wisdom and participants' personal meanings. Facilitator helps to express negative feelings and to deal with it. Artistic reading strengthens listeners' interaction with poetry. Facilitator shares her inner experience reading text in artistic way. An artistic reading act on inner intelligence, facilitates holistic understanding of human being, enlarges the field of consciousness and confirms personality.

### 3.3 Social value of educational project

After 8 learning weeks we had a small free interview with participants having purpose to explore the benefit and the need of our project. Women evaluated project as a possibility to deal with loneliness; as a way to listen to powerful poetry and to experience inspiration to think, to write, to live; as a way to know group's participants better and to experience community feeling in the class; as a way to feel dignity, to improve self- evaluation, as easy

method of learning, much easier than listening to a traditional lecture. The speeches of the last interview were more expressive than speeches of the first interview, and were less health complaints. During our educational project “Education in Language Arts for Health” elderly people have learned to understand the literary meanings better, enriched the themes of their communication, liberated creative writing skills, but the highest learning outcomes - improved self-esteem, decreased sense of loneliness, a better understanding of his / her life.

#### 4. Limitations

Old people have problems with health, symptoms of progressive dementia can occur – these agents have influence on communication and learning. Education in language arts, language arts teacher’s experience were factors, which influenced old people motivation to learn, to communicate in literature learning environment.

#### 5. Conclusion

Old people are very sensitive to human dignity, and their dignity is vulnerable. Small resources, social isolation due to the withdrawal from the labour market, deteriorating health worsens mood, violate the dignity and self-evaluation. Elderly inhibit negative emotions, which reinforces the inflexibility of thinking, and the need to highlight the achievements of the past and lost health. Emotional inhibition reduces Self- evaluation, comprehension of new things and ability to focus on novelty, to understand the whole of human existence, to integrate individual episodes of personal life into a whole, to confirm the meaning of life, causes a very strong feeling of loneliness. Poetry, expressing the feelings associated with nature, allows to understand the spiritual whole and to recognize the self in it, so this poetry is very useful for establishing contacts with people who are experiencing a bad mood or wounded dignity. Learning to look for his / her and literary hero's existential similarities and writing in the class lets to distance from wounded dignity, releases inhibited emotions, and empowers to speak up about the unique experience, to become open to new existential and literary aesthetics’ impressions. Listening to stories and storytelling liberates from loneliness and improves communication, strengthens self-esteem, self-knowledge, improves expressivity of language, helps to interact with new knowledge and leads to problem solving. Communication in literature learning environment is way for simultaneous personal growth in emotional, cognitive and social levels and enriches elder’s relationship.

#### References

- Baltes, P., Ditman- Kohli, F., Kliegl, R. (1986). Reserve capacity of the elderly in aging sensitive tests of fluid intelligence. *Psychology and Aging*, 1, 172-177
- Battersby, D. (1987). From andragogy to gerogogy. *Journal of educational gerontology*. 2, 4-10
- Boulton – Lewis, G., M, Kuys, L, Lowie Kitchin, J. ( 2006). Learning and active ageing. *Educational gerontology*. 32(4), 271-282
- Boulton – Lewis, G.M. (2010). Education and learning for the elderly; why, how, what. *Educational gerontology*, 36, 213-228
- Dench, S. Regan, J. ( 2000). Learning in later life. Motivation and impact. Nottingham, UK, DIEE
- Faber, J.A. (2004). Therapy with the elderly. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 14:4,1-14
- Goldman, C. (2005). The wisdom of elderls. *ReVision*, 28(1) 46-48.
- Maderer, P., Skiba, A (2006). Integrative geragogy: Part 1 Theory and practice of basic model. *Educational gerontology*, 32, 125 -145
- Moody, H.,R.(1993). Overview. What is critical in gerontology and why important. In S.A Bass *Achieving a productive, ageing, society*. Westport, GT; Ausburn House
- Strom, R., Strom, Sh., Fournet, L., Strom, P. (2006). Cooperative learning in old age: instructions and assessment. *Educational gerontology*. 581-599. DOI:10.1080/0360127970230607