Didactics - age and gender-sensitive didactics for a training on the job

Results of the qualitative analysis

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In order to deepen and extend the existing knowledge about adults, 24 qualitative interviews were carried out with employees over the age of 45 during Module 3, Didactics – age- and gender-sensitive didactics for a training on the job. The investigation focused on how older people learn in corporate continuing education, and took into consideration the new information and communication technologies (ICT), as well as gender-specific differences. The topics explored included three large areas:

- Experiences with further education: private, corporate training schemes, motivation, learning at work
- Training scheme situation: trainer, co-determination, group size and composition, modes of teaching/learning, media, teaching/learning materials, transfer
- Experience with ICT: learning how to use ICT, learning needs

Qualitative Investigation

The qualitative interviews were carried out in accordance with problem-centric interview methodology and were evaluated with the use of qualitative content analysis. The responses were subsequently summarised and processed. The interviews were carried out in the trade/wood and service/retail industries in the provinces of Carinthia, Styria and Vienna. In the course of the interviews 12 women and 12 men from 14 companies[1] were interviewed; the precise distribution across industries and provinces can be seen in the following table:

Province ⟋ Industry	Carinthia		Styria		Vienna		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Trade/wood	3	3	1	2	0	1	10
Service/retail	4	0	0	5	4	1	14
Total	7	3	1	7	4	2	**24**

The interview partners were between 45 and 58 years old, their academic qualifications ranged from a school leaving certificate to a university degree.

Results

The most significant results of the analysis[2], which fall into the above-mentioned categories, are shown below.

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[1] Our special thanks go to the companies that were willing to facilitate contacts with potential interview partners
[2] A detailed description of the results (in german) of the investigation can be downloaded from the webpage of the EQUAL Development Partnership generations•potentials•strengths at www.g-p-s.at

Experiences with Further Education

With the exception of one person, all interview partners pointed out that further education schemes were offered and in part promoted and financed by their company. Attendance at training schemes appeared to be entirely voluntary, in other words without any corporate pressure. The investigation highlighted that further education schemes had a strong orientation along corporate requirements. On the one hand measures were organised when shortfalls were identified among the staff, on the other hand they were implemented when the working situation and working processes could clearly be improved. Some of the examined companies also offered training schemes aimed at general and personal development.

Training Scheme Situation

With regard to the gender of the trainer, interviewees emphasised that not the gender, but the subject and teaching competence were of primary importance. However, some differences were mentioned, for example one interviewee described some male trainers as slightly arrogant. A further interview partner referred to the trainer's opportunity to lead by example and explained that it was pleasant to have a successful female as a lecturer. The practical relevance of the training scheme is highly significant and was frequently mentioned. Interview partners expressed a wish for trainers with practical experience which can be incorporated into the course. This desire can be explained by the fact that a large part of adult learning is so called connection learning. This means that content, which does not find a connection in the memory, and which does not have a practical relevance, is very quickly forgotten. As far as the trainer is concerned, connection learning means picking up the participants from their current position, in other words, they must use the knowledge and experiences of the participants as an orientation guide. Attention was also drawn to a gender-specific distribution of topics, whereby subjects such as languages, psychology of work and presentation techniques were more likely to be taught by women, while men tended to teach in the technical and scientific fields.

With regard to group sizes, smaller groups of 10 to at most 25 people were preferred. This was justified by the explanation that it was easier to get to know each other in smaller groups, which lead to a more positive learning environment. However, interview partners also pointed out that the group size should depend on the subject being taught.

Interviewees welcomed a mixture of younger and older participants in the training groups. According to those questioned, a heterogenic composition allowed a greater exchange of experience and knowledge. In relation to the participation of women and men, mixed groups were preferred. Interviewees felt that a gender-heterogenic group also facilitated a better knowledge and experience exchange. However, closer questioning revealed some variations between the sexes. One interview partner mentioned that there were differences between the questions asked by women and men, and that men often asked just for the sake of asking a question. Men also mentioned differences. For example, one interviewee reported that when women attended male dominated courses, there was a better atmosphere and men showed off less. At this point it is important to mention that just under half of all those questioned were more likely to attend courses with a large female contingent.

Interviewees spoke of the importance of learning how to learn at the beginning of the training course, as in most cases the last learning experience had occurred a long time before. With regard to experiences of teaching and learning modes, a broad range was mentioned, from classical lectures to workshops. The previous experiences dictated which teaching and learning modes interviewees preferred. Group work was seen as very positive, as it encouraged an exchange of experiences and opinions. At this point it was also stated that teaching and learning modes should depend on the choice of topic. With the question about teaching and learning modes, the practical relevance was of particular importance, and it became very clear that interviewees wanted to be able to work on specific case studies and practise examples. This once again points to the relevance of connection learning, as contents, to which no connection can be made, are more quickly forgotten.

The use of media (projector, flipchart, PowerPoint, …) was largely seen as positive, helpful and supportive of learning. However, interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of correct usage and suitable preparation fitting the topic. One interviewee remarked that the content of the transparencies should be consistent with the content of the lecture. Another mentioned that the media should not move into the foreground and overshadow the trainer. With regard to teaching materials, it can be said that they were largely seen as positive, and the handouts were often used after the course to refresh the memory. When putting together the materials, trainers should take care to keep the handouts brief, precise and clearly structured. Pictures and graphs should be used for illustration purposes and space should be provided for additional notes. In connection with teaching materials a few interviewees also mentioned that PowerPoint slides were not suitable as handouts, as they were not detailed enough, and had to be supplemented with text.

Learning transfer is the name given to the process of transmitting and/or applying what has been learned from the learning situation to the working situation. The majority of interviewees confirmed that this transfer had taken place, they were able to apply part of their learning in their place of work, and some interview partners were also able to make use of it in their personal life. Several of the interviewees remarked that newly acquired knowledge could only be retained if it was also used.

Experiences with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Exposure to information and communication technologies (ICT) has become inevitable in working life today. Two thirds of those questioned stated that they could not imagine their place of work without a PC. Although ICT are also used privately, they have a more dominant position in daily working life. Only a few people said that ICT played a very small role or no role at all in their working and private life.

Half of those interviewed had taught themselves how to work with ICT, "learning by doing" being the key phrase. Training courses and the exchange of information with colleagues or family were a further important method of learning. The need for further training in the ICT area was mainly expressed in relation to specific user applications, but background knowledge about the functioning of a computer was also seen as useful. The willingness to learn more in this area is highly dependent on the usage and relevance of the contents in daily working life.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Learning is shaped and influenced mainly by socio-cultural and life-historical factors, and to a much lesser degree by age. In relation to age this means that older people do not learn less effectively, but rather that they learn differently, due to their diverse experiences. Learning for older people can be supported by the following measures:

- At the beginning of the training course sufficient time should be allowed for participants to get to know each other. This encourages a positive learning atmosphere, fear and inhibitions are dismantled. A good mixture of older and younger participants, and of men and women, also contributes to an effective exchange of knowledge and experience.

- Trainers must connect with the knowledge of the participants, i.e. participants should be carried forward from their current location. This means that contents should be clearly transmitted, foreign expressions should be avoided or explained. It is also important to include a detailed description of the contents in the course guide. Enough time should be allowed for clarification requests, and participants should be actively encouraged to ask questions. The motivation of participants by the trainer is a further significant aspect. Pressure should be avoided and trainers should be encouraging and create a supportive learning atmosphere.

- A further significant area, which is particularly relevant for older adults, is the practical application, in other words, the contents should connect to the existing knowledge and skills of the participants. Only by creating a practical link, the transfer of learning and the retention of the content can be supported at an older age, and the motivation of the participants can be positively influenced. A clear transfer of the contents also facilitates learning. In this context the time factor, such as the length of a course, is also relevant for older learners, as older adults generally acquire knowledge more gradually. A good choice of learning and teaching modes is vital, and they should be relevant to the topic. The same applies to the use of media resources. It is important to avoid letting the media take over, and instead to coordinate their use with the quality of the content and of the trainer. Where media is used, it should be used appropriately.

- Handouts should be short and precise. Special attention should be given to the usefulness and application of the contents. Texts should be clearly phrased and well structured, supplemented by appropriate pictures and graphs. They should also include space for additional notes.

- Finally it is clear from the results of the analysis and the findings extracted from literature that the use of varied learning modes is particularly important for older learners. These modes should facilitate a connection to the individual's history and understanding of learning, as the ability to learn depends on the personality and the individual learning experiences. Learning can really only be achieved through the active participation of the learner.