

Carmen Stadelhofer, Markus Marquard

Zentrum für Allgemeine Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung (ZAWiW) University of Ulm
Germany

The Internet as a chance for continuing education of seniors in a united Europe

Growing importance of the Internet

The importance of the Internet has changed fundamentally in the last years. While 10 years ago in 1995, during the first LILL Conference, many of the participants did not even know what the Internet is, there is hardly any area today which the Internet did not enter yet. It has a direct or an indirect effect on the everyday life of each individual and also on the whole society. All are influenced by the Internet; those who follow the new developments and who acquire the competences needed to use these technologies as well as those whom these developments are distant. This applies also to the strongly increasing group of older people. Also the field of continuing education will be decisively changed by the new technologies; information will be accessed through libraries and databanks worldwide and education programs will be provided by virtual universities or virtual adult education centres. This means, that the acquisition of skills needed for the use of the Internet, respectively 'acquisition of multimedia competence' is about to develop into the fourth key qualification like reading, writing and counting.

Digital gap in Europe

The digital gap in the society is in the first place the question of age, education level, sex, profession and urbanity; this is confirmed by the latest results from Eurostat. In the group of the 16 till 24 year olds, the share of the Internet users with 75% is three times as high as in the group of the 55-64 year olds (27%) and almost seven times as high as with the 65 till 74 year olds (11%). Similar results will be obtained in comparison of persons with high education level and those with a lower level.

The difference between men (51%) and women (43%) is similarly like with the population density with 58% in dense and 45% in not so dense inhabited areas not so significant. In the southern countries (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy) and in the new member states (with the exception of Slovakia and Estonia) the population density plays more important role. The difference between the countries are also large: in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Island and Norway more than half of the households have an Internet connection, while in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania and Turkey only one sixth of the household have a connection.

High costs of the Internet access and hardware as well as the lack of the needed skills were given as the main reasons for the absence of the Internet connections in households. Other factors such as considerations about protection of the private sphere or security reasons played a secondary role.

Surprising result is however, that in spite of the increase of the use of the Internet in all parts of the society the grade of the convergence of the various population groups, namely the digital gap, has not reduced itself. This is an empirical finding that continuing education institutions and especially those specialising in seniors' education have to face.

Target group differentiation and education orientation

People in the 'third age' represent a very heterogeneous group. It is a case of the so called 'active seniors', who differ in terms of their individual health condition, gender, education

preconditions, social situation, interests, needs, financial resources, etc. The sociologists speak in this connection also about various life styles and social milieus. This has enormous effect also in the relation to the Internet use as well as the motivation for continuing education and the utilisation of own potential in old age. Interest in continuing education is often related to educational opportunities which the person had in the childhood. The European comparison shows that also the education prerequisites of older people in Europe greatly vary from country to country, not to forget, that they vary also within the countries themselves. This applies also to the knowledge of foreign languages which are dependent on school education; these are not as common amongst older people as amongst the younger ones. One wider German research also points out, that the readiness to learn to use the new technologies in old age and to use it in an interactive way is very diverse.

Older people's learning fields

In spite of the heterogeneity within the 'older people's' group in each country and across the borders, they have in common that they have to face many challenges today on a personal and a social and political level which, determined by social developments, influence their immediate life situation and create basis for their social participation. In spite of all differences among older adults, the following common learning fields can be determined which are briefly described here:

1. *Learning field "learning 'ageing'":* preparation for own ageing, for the time of reduced mobility: living situation at home, care, social contacts, spirituality.
2. *Learning field "health and prevention":* to maintain and strengthen own health through relevant measures.
3. *Learning field "knowledge":* deepening and widening own knowledge and acquisition of new knowledge (for example ecology, medical care, new technologies).
4. *Learning field "competence transfer and post-professional engagement":* recognising own competences and transferring them to others in an adequate way, combining given knowledge with new one.
5. *Learning field "generation dialogue/intercultural dialogue":* experiencing and learning to understand other worlds and ways of living; knowing and practicing acceptance, frustration tolerance and conflict-solving strategies.
6. *Learning field "Europe":* opening oneself for Europe, acquiring 'European knowledge' and integrating it with own experiences, 'Europeanization' of other learning fields.
7. *Learning field "New technologies":* learn to use computer and Internet facilities in a meaningful way.

Media competence and cross-section competence

We are living in a world of rapid changes in economy, science and society. Life long learning is not a luxury, but a necessity for all people, so for the people too.

Starting from these considerations, it is the central task of continuing education institutions of older people in Europe, through various programs in the political, social and cultural education, to foster understanding of political themes, to strengthen preparedness for political and social cooperation and participation and to encourage this target group to commit themselves to others and to society.

In this framework, the competence of using the Internet in a productive way becomes a key qualification. Political information needs to be classified, processed and critically reflected upon. This is of special importance when such information which can be of high quantity but also of questionable quality spreads around the world in seconds. To support "media competence" as a basic qualification of democratic civic competence is a central

task of continuing education and of political education, particularly in relation to older people.

The use of the new technologies, especially of the Internet and the mediation of media competence is to be understood as a across-section competence. In relation to the empirical data on 'digital gap' in Europe, programs fostering the opening of the Internet to this target group should continue to be developed. However, the technology and the transfer of the competences should not become a means to an end. The use of the Internet and the computer should be trained in connection to other subject areas, it must be considered as a work instrument, like phone, fax and handy.

Function of the Internet in continuing education

In relation to the introduced learning fields discussed below will be demonstrated with concrete examples of 'good practice' subjects the potential of the Internet for continuing education and especially for political education. The following functions are especially interesting for political education:

- Information and research function
- Communication function
- Interactive learning
- Participation function

Besides Email, **the information function** of the Internet is used the most frequently. No other medium makes such fast retrieval of information possible. Also as far as the variety of information is concerned, the Internet cannot be beaten. The Internet portals, Internet newspapers, websites of organisations and initiatives, information offers from continuing education suppliers, companies, political organisations and lexicons, such as for example Wikipedia, which is offered in more than 100 languages. Over searches in libraries, universities and other Internet providers, special knowledge can be retrieved. To all of the above mentioned learning fields much information could be called up. The problem is however in the self-governed learning process and in the selection and the evaluation of the information. This is only possible with relevant orientation knowledge and may need support by the institutions of general education (e.g. training advice).

Before the information function ranks the **communication function** of the Internet. The most important communication media is the Email, besides Emails to individual persons, mailings can be made or mailing lists used. Further functions are forums and chats (web based or IRC), also video conferences via for example the Netmeeting. The importance of Newsgroups is no longer significant. These communication forms can be applied in various ways in learning processes. While Email is suited for quick information distribution, tandems or correspondence partnerships, forums (with time delay) and chats (synchronous) can be well used for group communication. Interviews with experts or politicians are also often done over forums or chats. This does not usually lead to an open and critical discourse of the actors. Forums are also used for experience exchange, for example in the area of self-help.

Due to its **interactive potential**, the Internet differs from other mass media, it is not a 'one way street', it makes novel learning processes and learning forms possible. In learning courses, in interactive role plays or virtual self-learning groups, the learners receive feedback and are at least symbolically integrated in their community. Learners can interactively check their learning results and sometimes also publish it. In the model project of ZAWiW "Learning together through Internet" and in the Association ViLE-Learn-Network very interesting moduls of self-governed virtual learning groups are effectually tried and tested. Interesting example is p.ex. the project '*Die kulturelle Werte Europas (European*

Cultural Values'). Here the seniors discuss together the chapters of a book with contributions of scientists from different faculties. The project is moderated and documented by the participants themselves, they bring in a lot of competies reflecting the subjects.

Virtual learning does not mean in any way giving up real meetings, a good example here is the project '*ODE – Open Doors to Europe*'. Together seniors from various European countries search for so called 'door openers' which should help them to overcome cultural and language barriers. The results are exchanged over the Internet, discussed and published.

Because of the above shown possibilities, the Internet has yet another aspect, **the participation function**. The self-governed virtual learning project 'Election observation' at the time of the European and the German Federal elections shows, that seniors articulate their interests and can involve politicians in debates over the Internet. The results from the discussions and the interviews were subsequently published. In spite of a good resonance from the politics and the community, influence of such a project should not be overvalued.

In the virtual Learning course Europ@online from the Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg (*State headquarters of political education*) about the EU and political contexts the participants enlarged knowledge, but there were also talks with politicians via forum and chat. The real successes of such learning projects lie in the acquisition of knowledge on part of the participants, not in the direct influence on the politics. The Internet may support networking and lobby work, political influence is however possible mainly via the real political structures.

Conclusion

The Internet offers many possibilities in the areas of information, communication, and interactive learning participation. "Those who are already interested in politics, are motivated and active, use the new potentials of the Internet to the full; but those who were apolitical until now, will not be motivated nor mobilised by the new technology." (Hoecker, APuZ 39-40/2002). In this respect, continuing education is challenged to provide innovative programs which help to reduce the digital gap in our society and to empower older people to lobby for themselves, for others and for the society.

Links:

www.gemeinsamlernen.de
www.vile-netzwerk.de

(translation: Gabriela Körting)