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SENIOR WOMEN ICT INCLUSION AND LEARNING

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are strong power tools. They are the social, political and cultural expression of society - the result of negotiation among innovators, social groups and politicians - and are not something autonomous and separate from it.

As cultural products, expression of a culture, it is important that attention is paid to ICT access and use and the creation of the knowledge that this culture produces.

ICT strategic relevance in many fields of our daily life, underlines the importance that both men's and women's points of views are taken into consideration (gender mainstreaming strategy) for everybody's quality of life and for services that can meet the different targets' needs. If one social group, with experiences that come from one point of view decides how the future will be for everybody, it offers a partial and distorted view.

The issue of women's participation to ICT access and use emerged in the '90 when computer and internet use exploded: inclusion-exclusion, gender stereotypes, culture and gender differences, socialization models, are some of the issues brought up and debated as gender digital divide was deep and widespread.

If latest data on young women and men generations confirm that the divide is quickly decreasing - as it is the case in Italy - there is another important issue to take into consideration, that is the digital divide that regards senior people and senior women in particular ¹.

In 2006, ISTAT, the Italian Institute for Statistics, has published a research on ICT use of Italian people² and these recent results confirm a digital-divide that involves senior people: "Families composed only with senior people continue to be excluded from possession of technological goods: 5% has a personal computer, only 2,8% has internet access."

The characteristics of senior people that come out from this research are:

- Their pc and internet use are very limited
- Pc and internet use decrease with age increase
- Men use pc and internet more than women
- About 50% of senior people do not use pc because they are not able to
- They do not have places to go outside home, to use a pc and internet
- It is not the cost the reason why senior people do not use pc and internet

Gender digital divide is certainly a fact today for mature and senior women (+55): the strong male symbolic-cultural dimension of technologies and gender stereotypes have prevented most women of this group, from pc/internet learning and practicing. Moreover "Women who are senior today are those who have less taken advantage of better education opportunities and among them there is still a large part of population that have little or no

¹ Certainly the early learning process of pc and internet use at school and at home - together with girls and young women's subjectivity more conscious of the role of ICT in their work and life plans - have contributed to decrease women large disadvantage in pc and internet access and use of only a few years ago

² ISTAT, *Information and communication technologies: availability in the families and use of persons*, 2006

formal education at all....Senior age is strongly influenced by how the previous years have been lived, the choices made, the chances taken.”³

If not required by their jobs in later working life to get pc and internet competence, mature and senior women - even if educated - face today a long list of obstacles they have to overcome in order to avoid a final exclusion from all that pc and internet could allow them to do.

If on one hand 70% of Italian senior women today are little or not at all educated, and probably used to none of life long learning habits, on the other hand it is as well true that there are many senior women that want to take the chance of being included in the ICT society as our experience, even if limited,⁴ has confirmed.

It has been evident that it is not a high level of education or upper social class that determine their wish to continue to learn but the intellectual openness, the habit of a social and cultural active life and familiarity with learning contexts.

They want to feel included and continue to improve the quality of their life as they have been doing before and after their retirement years, ready to engage in new experiences and to overcome the obstacles they meet. They want to be able to send e-mails to their children who live far away, to look for information on internet on which is the nearest chemist's open on a Sunday, to feel near the life of their grandchildren that use internet for their homework, to find the cheapest flight to London.

The women who attended our class - on basic pc and internet in Nov. Dec. 2006 - were middle class, with a secondary school diploma, worked as employees, 63 years old on average.

The principal factors that have caused the 'gender digital divide' of senior women, no matter the level of their education or social and economic conditions, are many and have acted in their different life cycles, from their childhood to school life, from work to adult family life.

Here are some of the obstacles that have prevented most senior women from being familiar with technology.:

- the socialization process in the family and at school, according which little and young girls have been encouraged to take care of human relationships and social activities, to choose only certain education curricula, leaving the technological fields to males, with the consequence that they feel technology as an unfamiliar/extraneous element.
- the important learning function performed by video games that allow/allowed boys and men to get an early and easy familiarity with computers. The subjects (fights, wars, sports/cars game), the language and structure (military jargon, a lot of movement and aggressiveness) they propose, do/did not attract women as it does to males
- the less chances women have had to access home pc as the priority, both for the purchase and the use, was given to the males of the family as their work is valued more and, when at home, they usually have all their time at disposal
- the difficulty women meet to 'have time for themselves' because: family roles and responsibilities do/did not leave them much time; because of the guilty feelings women have/had if they steal some of the time to the family needs; because of family members' and other people's blame if their behaviour do/did not follow the established and approved ways.
- the less money women have at disposal both as housewives and as workers (considering the less money they gain compared to men)
- the less value of women's work in general that, as a consequence, requires less economic investments

³ R. Palomba, N. Signorotti, *Quella certa età: l'invecchiamento delle donne*, in *Storia delle donne*, 2 (2006) Firenze University Press

⁴ GbQ and a European Partnership: *E-Government guide for senior citizens*, Grundtvig project, 2004-2007

- the easy, bold and skilful men's attitude towards technology that reinforces women's idea that it is a men's field and that women are not good at it
- the idea that men are the source of knowledge as ICT teachers are usually males (brothers, fathers, male friends or teachers) and they can solve their problems
- and last but not least, men have designed the system that is therefore expression of their culture and points of view

As a consequence, senior women that face today computer and internet world, perceive themselves as unable, they show a great distrust in their capabilities, fear of not succeeding, of not being up to it, of not having the adequate knowledge to face a traditionally male field, blaming themselves for all these difficulties, with little or no consciousness at all of the conditioning stereotypes they have lived.

In the first days of class, the mature and senior women who attended our course on basic pc and internet use⁵, expressed with great emphasis all their fear making very clear that: 'they were not able to do anything', 'knew nothing about it', 'were not sure they could make it', with a mixed attitude of bewilderment, fear and a strong determination to get what they wanted.

Training for senior women on pc and internet skills, has to take into consideration not only senior people needs but also the gender stereotypes they have experienced and the different way women approach technology subjects.

Mature and senior women's approach to technology (compared to men's)

These problems and the different way women approach a learning context, contribute to their different attitude in computer training course:

- women are more rigid, less flexible when facing technological problems because they do not have full control of the machine, the movements of which are obscure
- women need a trainer that guides them while men throw themselves into technology with an experimental active attitude; as women fear it, they need a mediated approach
- women have a reverent attitude towards technology and the computer, they experiment less as they are afraid of making mistakes, of breaking the pc: they are used to build, to create, not to destroy; men, since their childhood, are used to disassemble their toys, to fights that destroy them, to experiment and make mistakes
- women's approach is systemic, through the trainer and the handbook; it is precise and methodical, aimed at getting instrumental results: they are not interested on how a pc works and how it is made but what they can do, what they can 'build' with it.

After overcoming the initial phase - conditioned by fear and distrust in their capabilities - women in general get better results because they are more strict in getting what they want while men are more inclined to divert.

Methodology for a gender approach in teaching senior women pc and internet

Senior women need great attention in the initial phase as they need support to overcome the obstacles that prevent them from expressing all their capabilities and potentialities.

⁵ GbQ and a European Partnership: *E-Government guide for senior citizens*, Grundtvig project, 2004-2007

It is important that they acquire consciousness as regards the kind of socialization they have lived, the gender stereotypes they have experienced at home and at work so as to be able to overcome the idea and belief of their 'inborn' inability to interact with a computer.

Training has to include structured moments to get self-confidence with these new subjects and to strengthen the capability they already have as it is important that they understand why and how their fear and reticence with technology issues was born.

The process of gender stereotypes awareness-raising, the strengthening of self-esteem and the capabilities to master technology, has to be treated not as a subject taught apart but it has to be integrated in the teaching methodology, making references to their behaviour, to the experiences lived, to the choices made, to the motivations that supported them. Senior women can get self-consciousness through 'dialogues' and 'tales' with their class mates who have had similar experiences, guided by a female teacher. It is through a biographical methodology that they can understand and recognize one another experiences and the motivations of their difficulties with technology and the processes that produced them.

Taking the input from a sentence or an attitude of the women, the teacher can introduce awareness-raising issues, discuss about experiences and feelings by means of questions like 'Why do you think you can't? Who told you so? What were your feelings? What did you do then?...'

It can be useful to make some self-esteem and empowerment exercises, as well as some questionnaires or role-playing and the results to be discussed in the class so as to share experiences and feel supported.

Senior women trainers therefore have to be competent in:

- the gender stereotypes senior women have lived according which they are not 'good at' technology
- the consequent women's problems and needs as regards self-assurance and self-consciousness with technology matters
- the gender differences as regards the learning approach
- the learning needs of a senior person, in general

To sum up, in order to overcome the digital divide mature and senior women suffer, trainers have to be competent both in gender stereotypes and gender differences and the teaching methodologies for senior people.