



SENIORS IN EUROPE – TODAY AND TOMORROW

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Three basic aspects

In Europe today we can observe at least three different ways of looking at seniors/retired people. They are overlapping each other and exist at the same time but differs from each other in perspective. There is a continuum between the more traditional aspects a) and the more elaborated modern aspects c). Simplified this can be described in the following diagram:

a)	b)	c)
Seniors as excluded and a burden for the society	Seniors as not disturbing the process of production	Seniors as included in and a part of the society

Diagram 1. Three aspects on seniors

In aspect a) It is up to each individual to arrange for his/her retirement or even be “sold” on a market.

In aspect b) It is OK if a senior is trying to keep him/herself healthy to minimise the costs for the rest of the society.

In aspect c) The society aims at taking care of the knowledge of its seniors.

These three different aspects on the role of seniors in the society constitutes a social background for the understanding of results from the EduSenNet project.

We want to get a better understanding of lifelong learning for seniors in Europe today – why it is important, how and when it could be arranged and for what use. Before we go into details we further want to highlight the three different aspects. This is done in the following three subchapters which each deals with one of the aspects. We first discuss *retirement – a new situation* as we think this is a very crucial point for every individual. Secondly we discuss and put focus on how we can continue our lives as healthy seniors under the heading “*Sense of coherence*”. Thirdly we try to explain and come up with ideas about what “*senior knowledge*” really means.

Retirement – a New Situation

Retirement should be looked upon in its new context, not as something necessary for all when work/labour was so hard that very few people were able to continue after a certain age. Work has changed and so should “not work”. Most of us enjoy to do something, to mean something and to find a meaning in life. Now many seniors do go into a crisis because of loss of identity at retirement, as retirement more means a mental loss than freedom. If life becomes too still the brain seems to have the capacity to develop fears which are not real and not easy to handle. – *“If a bicycle stops it will fall”*.

This is also illustrated by the answers of the questionnaire when people say that they themselves have to overcome some psychological obstacles to engage themselves in new learning activities after retirement.

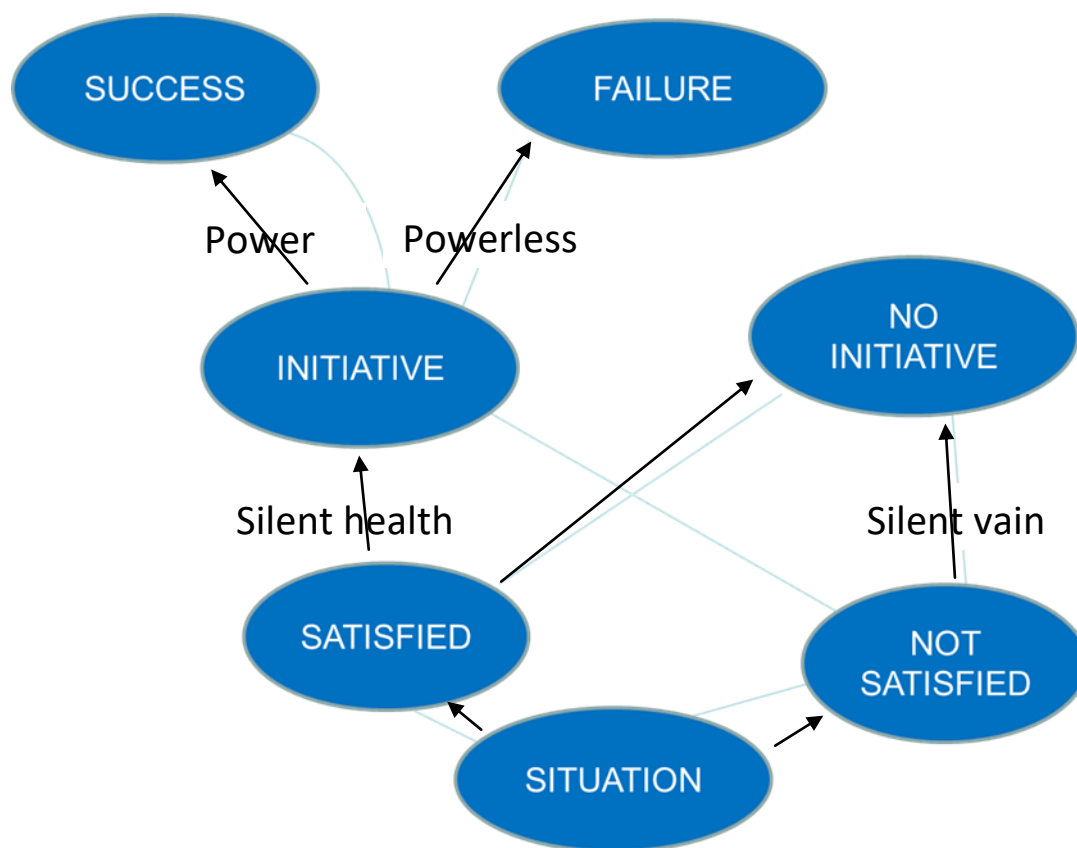


Diagram 2. Power and control of a situation - different alternatives for action

A Sense of Coherence

Many answers point out why people think that learning activities are important in later life. This is in line with the ideas of [Aaron Antonovsky](#), a professor of medical sociology. The term *salutogenesis* - coined by Antonovsky - describes an approach focusing on factors that support human health and well-being, rather than on factors that cause disease. More specifically, the "salutogenic model" is concerned with the relationship between health, stress, and coping. Antonovsky's theories reject the "traditional medical-model dichotomy separating health and illness". He described the relationship as a continuous variable, what he called the "*health-ease* versus *dis-ease* continuum". In his formulation, the sense of coherence has three components:

- *Comprehensibility*: the extent to which events are perceived as making logical sense, that they are ordered, consistent and structured.
- *Manageability*: the extent to which we are able to cope with situations.
- *Meaningfulness*: the extent to which we feel that life has a meaning and that it is worth taking part in and to meet challenges.

According to Antonovsky, the third element is the most important. If a person believes there is no reason to persist and survive and confront challenges, if they have no sense of meaning, then they will have no motivation to comprehend and manage events. His essential argument is that "salutogenesis" depends on experiencing a strong "sense of coherence." His research demonstrated that the sense of coherence predicts positive health outcomes. What we can see from the answers is that learning activities in a social context strengthen the sense of coherence and thus health.

Senior Knowledge

The classical pedagogy has mainly dealt with education and teaching and less with learning. A more developed pedagogy for seniors has to concentrate more on the seniors as learners and less on the teachers. Learning does not necessarily mean that we want to be activated by others. We need more of other people to discuss with and mentors who can help to sort out thinking structures and are interested in a step by step growing holistic view. We have got the experience and time to think and reflect, but we are not passive but reflective actors following Schöns terminology: "*reflective practitioner*".

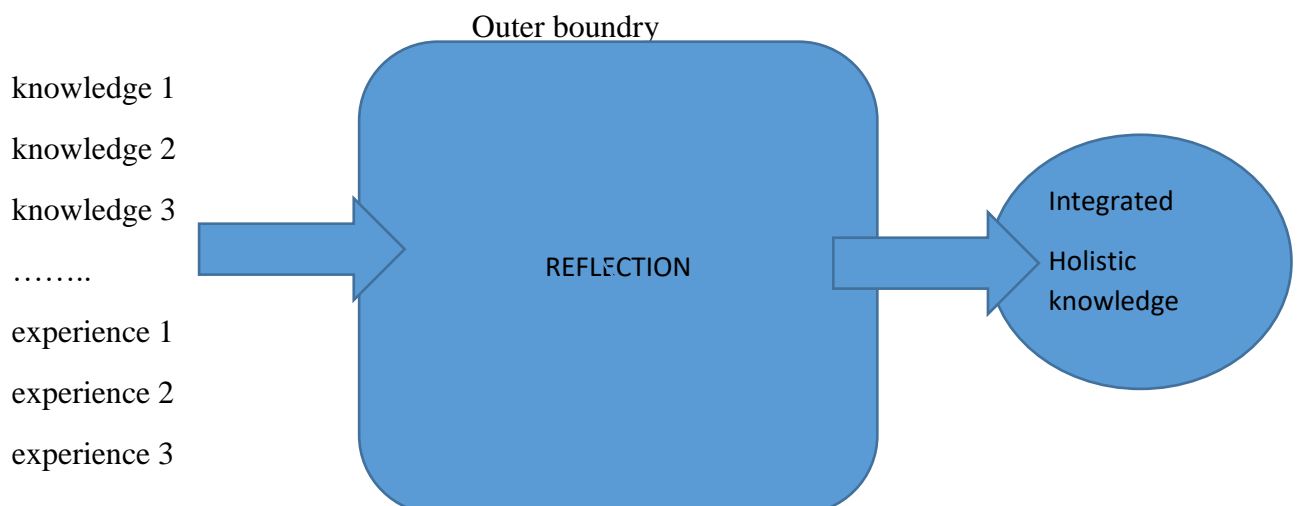


Diagram 3. Senior knowledge as a result of reflection

We need a new way of research on ageing, where also seniors are actively engaged. What is presented in this report is a humble step in this direction. We can contribute even if we have not got the economic resources and works at a slower speed. At the same time it will give us a chance to be seen and listened to to get the evidence that we *exist* and still learn even if we perhaps learn in another way than young people. We do not learn facts as easy and do not remember all of them the same way as we used to do – but at the same time we have the capacity of integrating new knowledge with old knowledge and experience which helps us to understand complex situations and perhaps come up with other alternative ideas than young people do. We still have no way to measure in a scientific way if it is like this but we hope for someone who will do research on it and develop instruments for it.

Role of Seniors in the Society

Work has traditionally (Taylorism) been measured as time. What would happen if work was measured in terms of results? Perhaps this would suit better as seniors who could then concentrate on good results and not on the time which young people do. From a survey in Uppsala (USU) it is reported that out of 188 seniors 28% had wanted to continue with the job they had - either fully or partly - but were forced to retire. (USU report no. 14. 2012)

A discussion have now started about the future labour market and different models for it, where perhaps even seniors could fit in. We need to ask new questions which are not based on old thinking and traditional division between labour and what is now “not labour”/ retirement.

How do differences in living conditions and the distribution of individual resources determine the ability of citizens to participate in decision-making processes? What is the distribution of power, resources and influence among seniors – and seniors compared to other groups? We need solid data on this to be able to work for a more fair and equal situation!

Retirement age regulations may be practical from an administrative point of view but “elderly” as a concept is a social construction. We carry with us our capabilities and experiences throughout life, and even though our power and energy may decline with age, society cannot afford not to make use of all the knowledge and experience held by the entire population - including not excluding seniors.

We cannot as seniors just be looked upon as taxpayers and voters at elections. For a continuous development of democracy in the society we all need lifelong learning as a basic foundation for taking active part. The great political challenge in a country where many reach a high age must be to find ways of strengthening elderly people’s capacity to cope with new situations, to find consistency and meaning in life, and thus also ensure that they remain in good health. We would thus stress the importance of lifelong learning as a means for seniors to gain power for taking active part in democratic and political processes in the society.