

## Making Adult Teaching Useful, Relevant and Engaging – MATURE

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*Abstract: MATURE stands for Making Adult Teaching Useful, Relevant and Engaging. It is a Grundtvig multilateral project co-funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning programme. The project began in October 2012 and ends in September 2014. It will develop training for adult educators on the theme of engaging and motivating older adults who, because of disadvantage, find it difficult to participate in group learning. The MATURE team will: conduct research; develop and deliver units of training for face to face and on-line use; create a booklet for organisations outside education who act in as intermediaries between older adults and the services they need or are entitled to.*

### 1. Introduction

The MATURE project will address the training needs of practitioners in formal and non-formal adult education in respect of reaching, engaging and motivating older adults who do not readily participate in learning. Our focus is on overcoming age related barriers, aggravated by additional disadvantage caused by health, dependency, cultural and/or attitudinal issues that impact negatively on participation. The project considers the role of intermediary agencies in empowering older people to take part and presents a model of learning that is collaborative within and beyond education providing for the well-being of seniors through integrated responses to learning need. The team undertakes this project as a result of a perceived and proven need to do better in reaching and motivating older people isolated from communities and locations where support and active resolution of difficulties can be sought.

The MATURE project arises from our concern about the practical challenges of implementing learning that can claim to be for non-participant, disadvantaged older people. Statistics prove that adult education consistently fails to engage significant numbers of seniors. Predecessor projects

have identified that this failure results in part from the way that learning is developed and delivered, its accessibility and content. Work with traditionally non-participant groups in these projects has begun to reveal additional barriers to their engagement, made more severe in later life. Anecdotal evidence proves our hypothesis that non-engagement can have a detrimental effect on proactive longevity. Previous work has developed our understanding of the impact of issues such as health, dependency, culture, ethnicity and attitude on the lives of older adults and their willingness or otherwise to participate generally. We are aware that there is insufficient advice about how to address and overcome such barriers within educational contexts; adult learning remains within the grasp of those with the skills to access and cope with it, not those who may benefit the most from it.

Drawing on good practice from within the partnership, from Europe and beyond, the project will provide content and advice for face to face teacher training; units of online CPD training for self-access and a booklet for intermediary agencies working with older people. These products will be available in all partnership languages and freely accessed from the project's web site. The team proposes an end of project conference and post project delivery of face to face training by members of MATURE to further cascade our practical solutions to an intransigent problem.

MATURE's target groups are: professional and volunteer teachers, trainers and managers in AE; individuals and organisations from outside education who work on behalf of older adults and/or those who are 'disadvantaged'; organisations in a position to mainstream and multiply project products in Europe.

MATURE principles are following:

- The long term independence and wellbeing of older people is dependent on their continued ability to learn and to act on learning.
- Effective learning for older people is best achieved through a collaborative process that goes beyond education and includes the individual/s at whom learning is targeted.
- However challenging, the learning needs of all adults should be the concern of all learning providers.
- Changing learning might be demanding but it's not impossible.

MATURE aims and objectives:

- Identify and analyse the barriers to engagement in learning faced by older adults who feature in national data on non-participatory groups.
- Seek out from our own resources and from national, European and international sources examples of good practice in engaging hard to reach older adults.
- Extrapolate from this research key and common concepts and strategies to form the basis of a European response to the engagement of disadvantaged older people.
- Explore the role of intermediary agencies, organisations and individuals in supporting older people to take action and publish information and advice about that role.
- Analyse the potential role of intermediaries in overcoming barriers to participation in learning.

- Configure the outcomes of exploratory work into face-to-face and online training. Training will package practical strategies for engaging and motivating hard to reach older adults with examples of empowering curriculum planning and analyses of effective methodologies and content. It will provide comprehensive support for practitioners wishing to widen participation among those most at risk from exclusion from learning.
- Test the training and advice it develops within partner countries and elsewhere in Europe.
- Ensure that MATURE products are quality assured through the implementation of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan.
- Make the products of MATURE as widely accessible as possible during the lifetime of the project and beyond.
- Take a multi-lingual approach to the publication of project products.
- Make appropriate links on behalf of the project across Europe so that it and its products are part of the discourse on learning, teacher training and the welfare and wellbeing of older adults.

## **2. The MATURE project team**

The MATURE team is experienced in regional, national and European project work on the theme of older people and learning with expertise in: policy development; research; statutory adult education; voluntary and NGO activity; teaching and training in adult education; participation in and leadership of European educational projects; learning and technology.

The following institutions are members of the project team:

1. University of Leicester, Institute of Lifelong Learning, Leicester, UK
2. Bia-net Netzwerk Bildung im Alter, Graz, Austria
3. Verband der Schweizerischen Volkshochschulen, Bern, Switzerland
4. Hamburger Volkshochschule, Hamburg, Germany
5. PRO-MED spolka z ograniczona odpowiedzialnoscia , Gdansk, Poland
6. AidLearn, Consultoria em Recursos Humanos, Lda., Lisbon, Portugal
7. Zveva drustev upokojencev Slovenije, Ljubljana, Slovenia
8. 50 + Hellas, Athens, Greece.

### 3. Case study - Computer breakfast in Hamburg since 2010

The Computer breakfast for older learners (Computerfrühstück für Ältere, VHS - Hamburger Volkshochschule) initially was founded because the planners in VHS often experienced a shyness of older persons to join computer courses, even those for older persons. Their main concerns when asked were:

- I do not know whether I can follow and then I have to pay the course in full, I cannot afford that
- I do not know whether I will be well enough throughout the lifetime of the course....
- I only want to learn this one thing (sending mails, booking travel, optimizing my photos...)

Make appropriate links on behalf of the project across Europe so that it and its products are part of the discourse on learning, teacher training and the welfare and well being of older adults.

These answers among others made us think about an alternative: an open offer to learn how to work the computer (including internet uses), but without the structure of a course, there is no common aim, everyone learns at their own speed and with their own aims. "Teachers" are in the background only to get the learners started and help them on their way of learning.

The initial contact with older learners was made by a little notice in the weekly advertisement paper of the neighbourhood; this is mainly read by older people. After that, we never needed to make the programme known publicly, there were always enough and more new learners who wanted to join the meetings (twice a week). That was at the start in April 2010.

Key messages were necessary to make learning attractive to these older adults? They are: openness (you only pay when you come), no commitment, you learn those things you want to learn, no curriculum, but very social atmosphere (coffee, tea, something to eat). A "learning helper" waits in the background to help you when help is needed.

What changes had to be made by the learning provider to ensure that these older adults could participate in group learning? The changes are substantial: no enrolment process, no planning ahead of the content, we had to rely on the questions the participants asked and work with them. And: more than one responsible person in the room (mostly 2, sometimes volunteers). And one more: to create the social and nice atmosphere, an extra –effort had to be made to prepare coffee etc.

What plans were put in place to make attending group learning acceptable and enjoyable?

- Find the right time: late morning, same days as the farmers' market are in place.
- Find the right "teachers": they had to have the right attitude (trust the learners to steer their own learning process, don't overwhelm them with information that is not asked for)
- Openness for all: migrants, disabled persons, slow learners. Sometimes learners questioned these values and there had to be meta- discussions among the group to make clear that "all persons" means "all persons" and nobody (except persons too young) is excluded.

- Every time the effort to provide coffee, tea, cold beverages and something to snack is difficult to manage, especially when we are short on staff. But we did not have one single meeting without that. All co-workers feel responsible to help with that.
- We adopted a different view on the help of volunteers: before this programme, we mostly did not allow for volunteers in group learning, now we see the help of volunteers as a very welcome support.
- We did have to accept that the programme is cutting a hole in our budget even though the participants pay 2,50 € per attendance.

#### **4. Case study - Meeting with computers at Gdansk University of Technology**

Gdansk University of Technology pensioners and PRO-MED sp. z o. o. staff organized the first meeting in September 2008 in Czarlna summer camp. In Autumn 2008 there were several informal meetings organised with help of Ms Gizella Bober, a chairwoman of Gdansk University of Technology Seniors Club. In December 2008 the first formal meeting for seniors was organised and about 30 people took part in it. This meeting was dedicated to Lifelong Learning Grundtvig projects and training needs analysis. The first key message was "Let's start to be active participants in ongoing Grundtvig Partnership projects: EuBiA, IMPROGE, Connecting +55".

The first step was an enrolment for a computer course for beginners. The aim of this course was mastering the seniors basic computer skills, starting from using a keyboard and mouse. The first training materials in a form of books were sent to us by the UPC e-senior academy <http://www.upc.pl/o-upc/zaangazowanie-spoleczne/e-akademia-upc/akademia-e-seniora/>

Since 2008 thanks to the support of the Gdansk University of Technology Rector prof. Henryk Krawczyk and the Dean of WETI (the Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Informatics) prof. Krzysztof Goczyla meeting with computers for seniors regularly take place the computer laboratory of the Faculty of Electronics, Telecommunications and Informatics. The role of instructors performs PRO-MED sp. z o. o. and the GUT retired staff, students and PhD students.

In order to encourage older learners to take part in learning activities more than once a week blended learning (Face to Face once a week and e-learning 24 hours/7 days a week was proposed). For supporting e-learning LMS (Learning Management System) Moodle has been used. All lessons are available in a printed (A4) and in an electronic format (pdf). We propose building the OER (Open Educational Resources) repository based on Creative Commons licence ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative\\_Commons\\_licenses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_Commons_licenses)).

We think that the learning provider should take care about building ties between participants. We propose celebrating together Christmas, Easter, Birthdays. We also organise informal meetings such as Nordic Walking, Petanque, City Games in the open space.

We suggest including diversity of learning methods and diversity of supporting materials, offering courses/activities suitable to learning needs, involving intergenerational approach in order to strengthen ties between generations.

Personal involvement of older learners can be more encouraging if they take part in the ongoing national or international projects' activities (e.g. preparations or taking part in Grundtvig Partnership meetings), if they feel that they can be responsible for their learning process by choosing the most suitable subjects, if they have an opportunity to take part in physical exercises as Nordic Walking or gymnastic.; learning and technology

## 5. Current progress

The partners undertook some initial research around the barriers to later life learning to guide their work.

- Participation in learning declines with age.
- Participation in learning as an older adult is strongly influenced by previous educational achievement. Those who are 'educated' are more likely to participate.
- Socio-economic factors impact on decisions to participate or not.
- Older adults are more likely to participate in leisure/cultural focussed 'informal' learning than in vocational training.
- Informal learning is closely associated by learners with quality of life and well-being in older age.
- There is a noticeable shift in local, regional and national funding priorities towards vocationally orientated courses; learning for employment and employability.
- Older people who do not learn in groups learn from their social and family networks and from independent 'study' using libraries, museums, the media and computing as sources of knowledge and information.
- Group learning is viewed as an important facilitator of participation for older people; the influence of 'community' is beneficial in sustaining an active later life.
- Social inclusion and the offsetting of dependency become powerful motivators for learning in advancing years (60+) replacing the impetus to improve job prospects which is a key driver for the 'younger old' (50+).
- Other motivations include: keeping the brain active; acquiring new knowledge and practical skills for everyday life.
- Inability to see the need for or benefits of learning is a significant barrier to participation for older people.
- Other barriers include: health; access; price; family and care commitments; insufficient support; 'not for the likes of me' mentality.

One of the principal purposes of the MATURE project is to support learning providers to reach out to, engage with and motivate older adults who might draw benefit and enjoyment from group learning. From previous project work, MATURE partners have a number of tried and tested strategies for developing and delivering learning that works well for older people, that addresses issues

of ageing and that is successful in attracting non-traditional participants. It has become apparent, however, that a number of significant, age-related or age-aggravated barriers demand specific attention in order to truly widen participation.

Among the many disadvantages potential learners face, MATURE partners have chosen to focus on the following:

**Health** – physical and/or mental conditions that affect an individual's ability to participate in learning and/or be active in other areas of daily life. They may be conditions that have been lifelong or that arise as a result of ageing.

**Dependency** – the point at which an individual can no longer function effectively without consistent support from others. This support may come from family members, the state, private care organisations.

**Culture** – the cumulative knowledge, experience, beliefs and values of a group of people. Older migrants, older members of minority ethnic communities, older members of faith groups may be among those who experience cultural barriers to participation in learning and in the wider communities in which they live.

**Attitude** – the beliefs of older adults and the perceptions of others about age and ageing people. Positive and negative views of ageing, learning, education, status contribute to the formation of beliefs about oneself, one's role, one's rights, the responsibilities of others.

Our rationale for this selection comes from our work together in other European projects and individually at national level where we have expertise and experience in addressing specific learning need. We anticipate that in seeking to minimise barriers created by these areas of disadvantage we may create templates for more general action that will encourage participation from those who are hardest to reach.

To date our ambitions for learning are that:

- It is an active and experientially based activity.
- It is conceived and delivered with consistent input from the end user.
- Its effectiveness is judged by the impact on lives and individuals rather than the sum of quiescent skills.
- Its outcomes are many and varied; the most effective for older adults being those that deliver competences to underpin proactive longevity.
- It is not the sole preserve of 'education'. Collaboration and cooperation are key to the development and delivery of learning that works.

We adopted a different view on the help of volunteers: before this programme, we mostly did not allow for volunteers in group learning, now we see the help of volunteers as a very welcome support.

MATURE partners are convinced that learning has a major part to play in the maintenance and improvement of critical skills for everyday life and long term well-being. The application of what has been learned is of paramount importance in the drive to sustain independence. Placed centre stage among actions destined to underpin a way of life, learning assumes significance beyond that commonly attributed to it.

The diversity of adult education, its contexts, practitioners and structures make it virtually impossible to achieve consistent approaches to pedagogy, methodology and content. The flexibility that is an inevitable consequence of such diversity provides opportunities to mould learning differently. The MATURE project will support teachers who want to do precisely that; to re-shape what and how they teach in order to overcome barriers and deliver learning that will make a difference to the lives of the people they work with.

## 6. Summary

MATURE partners have a rich variety of resources upon which to draw to develop their training programme. The structure of the programme and the project's proposed products highlight aspects that MATURE partners know are sticking points in reaching the hard to reach:

- Initial engagement with non-participants: how does that happen? Who can help it to happen? What form does this engagement take? What are its outcomes?
- Involving people in learning: how do people 'own' learning? Who else has a stake in learning? How do they have their say? Who manages differing perspectives? How does that happen?
- Motivation to learn and motivation to continue learning: what stimulates learning? How can learning be configured to sustain interest and commitment? What are the roles and responsibilities within a learning situation?
- Relevant and applicable content: what should be learnt and taught? How do you learn to learn? How is content best derived? What methodologies work best? How does teaching inspire learning and make it happen effectively? What resources support learning?
- Progress and progression: what constitutes positive outcomes from learning? Who makes those judgements and how are they made? What opportunities arise from successful learning for learners; for teachers; for stakeholders; for non-learners?

The Mature partners will be focusing their attention on these issues over the next few months part of that work will be in learning more from others and building this expert opinion into appropriate training.

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