

# Training the trainers<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In 2008 the Senior Citizens' University concluded the SenTrain project (Train the Trainers), a Grundtvig Multilateral project within the European Commission Socrates programme. This project was designed to meet the urgent needs of trainers working with education for seniors on the topic of new technologies. Senior learners are frequently taught by ICT trainers with excellent expertise in technology and experience of teaching younger or adult learners, but without the necessary pedagogical skills needed for teaching senior learners. A growing demand was also noted from seniors with sufficient ICT skills who wanted to help their classmates through peer tutoring or by helping the regular teacher in class.

Today, ICT is a vital medium for communicating and exchanging information with family, friends and colleagues, as well as for accessing services and companies. Knowing how to use ICT is therefore necessary for maintaining contact with distant friends and avoiding loneliness (particularly in rural areas or for disabled people). Teaching ICT then becomes the main way to acquire ICT competences, but learning technology can give rise to negative feelings such as stress, shame or fear, usually due to bad previous experiences. Through the SenTrain project, we became aware of many pedagogical, environmental or motivational errors in teaching ICT to seniors. The result was that instead of providing a benefit, ICT teaching impacted negatively by causing anxiety, a refusal to engage with ITC and mental block.

Seniors can use ICT for a variety of purposes: to increase their participation in society, their psychological well being and perceived control, in short, to increase their quality of life. However, trainers have to be aware of learners' specific needs, their motivation, interests and requirements.

## Course implementation

The SenTrain project produced a coursebook with the following 10 units:

1. Evaluation of the learners' previous knowledge, their needs and the learning context
2. Steps for implementing courses
3. The teaching/learning process
4. Presenting the educational contents
5. Seniors' motivations
6. Effective communication
7. Feedback, evaluation and self-evaluation
8. Learning and memory in the third age
9. Gender specific issues
10. Teaching using the technology

This coursebook is the main material used during the first phase of the course. Each of these 10 units provides a theoretical introduction, followed by some examples and cases; in this way, during the teaching process every learner becomes familiar with the background and also has some practice. But it is in the second phase that learning becomes more practical and active: students are required to prepare a lesson and teach it to ordinary students and other instructors who are invited to attend to this class.

A course was designed and offered to new ICT teachers, to adults who wanted to acquire this kind of expertise (as part of the University training programme open to students enrolled on other courses) or to seniors who wanted to become trainers (as volunteers in other adult associations, or adult education institutions).

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<sup>1</sup> Pilar Escuder-Mollon. Universitat Jaume I. Spain

All the students had some ICT knowledge, but this was not enough. An initial evaluation was conducted to find out their level of expertise. Teaching ICT requires not only the abilities that are taught in this SenTrain course, but also ICT expertise.

All learners were predisposed to learn all the course concepts, so motivation was high and teachers' efforts could thus be focused on other aspects of teaching. Student participation in the classes was also very high and experiences were usually shared before and after the classes. All of the students had experience of ICT courses so they were aware of the teaching and learning process from the student's perspective.

Before the classes, all the students and teachers came together to share the experience of being students, linking the knowledge learnt and debating the content of the course. This occurred in an informal setting which allowed for relaxed discussion, and proved to be extremely useful. Teachers gained additional knowledge about the students and the class subject matter could focus on the key factors: where students had the greatest problems, aspects they were most worried about, etc.

In the first phase of the course, the content was based on the project course book. This was a theoretical phase; nevertheless, in each explanation practical examples and cases suggested by the students were always necessary to lend meaning to the theory. Teachers encouraged students to propose and suggest examples to apply in each unit. This was very effective: from the experience that students had as ICT learners, they could identify past experiences they had, and thanks to the course and new ideas, they were able to correct and suggest new teaching approaches.

In the second phase of the course, all the students had to prepare a very short lesson (45 minutes, although this was always longer) to present to the rest of the class. After each class, a discussion was held so everybody could suggest changes.

## **Conclusion**

At other education levels (young people, adults) education is mainly provided as a way to acquire knowledge and skills to gain competitiveness and get a better job. Education for seniors differs in that, firstly, it is more human with a focus on their personal motivations and interests. Secondly, ICT has great potential; it is a powerful tool that can impact on seniors' lives positively (its use in their daily life can affect their well-being and quality of life), but also negatively. Finally, because of the complexity and impact of the technology, learning it can lead to positive and negative feelings.

These three reasons leave no doubt that ICT is a very important factor in seniors' quality of life. Trainers must be aware of that complexity, which was the aim of the course: firstly to provide knowledge using a guide, secondly, to acquire skills, and thirdly to learn from other colleagues during the second phase of the course in which they taught a practical lesson to other students.

This text is part of the book “Education and quality of life of senior citizens”. See the full book in <http://www.edusenior.eu>

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Publisher: Universitat Jaume I, Castellón, Spain, and University of Helsinki, Finland

ISBN: 978-84-8021-986-0 (Spain)

ISBN: 978-952-10-7760-9 (Finland)

The full book form is part of the “Evaluation toolkit on seniors’ education to improve their quality of life” project (<http://www.edusenior.eu>). This project is supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission reference: 518227-LLP-1-2011-1-ES-GRUNDTVIG-GMP.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This communication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.