

University Programmes for Senior Citizens. From their Relevance to Requirements

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Introduction

In 2003, my department – Department of Portuguese and Romance Studies (DEPER) – approved the idea of organising, at the *Faculdade de Letras*, University of Porto, a scientific meeting on University Programmes for Senior Citizens with foreign invited speakers who could share with us their long experience in university programmes, learning in later life, and the effects of cognitive aging, namely on language.

As I was, to a certain extent, familiar with the topic, and also interested in studying the effect of literacy on cognitive aging, my department gave me the responsibility of contacting specialists in the area who might be interested in collaborating with us, and subsequently of organising the event in the following year, 2004.

Indeed, I had had the opportunity to attend some international conferences on university programmes in Canada and in Spain, and I also had the possibility of exchanging ideas on learning in later life and on the effects of education on cognitive aging with professors and researchers from different universities. Naturally, my colleagues were aware that my experience was valuable and not to be ignored.

The organisers of the event (my colleague João Veloso and myself) came to the conclusion that to begin with, a Series of Lectures (four in number) divided into two moments would be the best solution. Four lectures took place at the *Faculdade de Letras*, University of Porto, sponsored by my department (DEPER) and the Embassy of Spain in Lisbon, in 2004: the first two on the 29th October, and the remaining two on the 3rd December. Four foreign experts were invited (one from the United Kingdom: Dr. Alexandra Withnall, Senior Lecturer and Director of Continuing Professional Development of Warwick Medical School, and three from Spain: Prof. Mariano Sánchez Martínez, from the University of Granada, Prof. Juan Sáez Carreras, from the University of Murcia, and Prof. Onésimo Juncos Rabadán, from the University of Santiago de Compostela).

The Series of Lectures was entitled *University Programmes for Senior Citizens. From their relevance to requirements*. Due to the Portuguese scenario in this domain, the aim of the title of this Series was to provide answers to the following questions:

Does it make any sense to create university programmes in Portugal today?

Do these programmes require a suitable preparation/training for their instructors?

What do senior citizens expect from university programmes?

Are older people's learning and conversational abilities dependent upon their cognitive development/aging?

The first two invited speakers (Prof. Mariano Sánchez Martínez and Prof. Juan Sáez Carreras) presented lectures in which it is possible to find answers to the first three questions. They spoke respectively about "Los programas universitários para mayores. Modelos, estrategias y prácticas", and "Intervención socioeducativa con personas mayores". The last two invited speakers (Dr. Alexandra Withnall and Prof. Onésimo Juncos Rabadán) tried to answer the last question and spoke respectively about "Older learners: challenging the myths" and "Capacidades conversacionales en vejez. Evaluación e intervención". They presented their lectures in English and Spanish, the working languages of the event. This also explains the languages of this publication.

Before I begin to present the contributions included in this volume, it is worth going deeper into the explanation of the title of this Series of Lectures. The title of the series begins with the noun-phrase "university programmes" because, as we do not yet have university programmes for the third age at our public or private traditional universities, we wished to stress that we were not talking about

the Portuguese institutions which already offer cultural and social programmes for older people. It is important to bear in mind that I am referring here to university programmes and not to free courses in a variety of subjects or cultural activities. Indeed, since 1976, the year of the creation in Lisbon of the first University of Third Age (U3A), there have been institutions in Portugal which, for want of a better title, are not only called U3A but also academies, associations or institutes, linked to associations, to parish centres, to institutions of social solidarity and to the *Santa Casa da Misericórdia*, supported by the *Segurança Social* (Social Security), *Câmaras Municipais* (City Councils), the Church and private contributions. They were created by the civil society and are not, therefore, run by the state. These cultural institutions offer free courses on different topics in the realm of humanities, sociology, foreign languages, creative reading and writing, health and (plastic) arts, as well as other activities such as gymnastics, choral singing, music, drama, swimming and handicrafts. Their “students” are motivated as much by the social idea of attending “university” as by the idea of increasing their knowledge or improving their education¹.

It is, however, important to add that, especially since the 1990s, namely the late 1990s, Portuguese senior citizens who wish to attend free courses at U3A – let us give this name to the institutions which in general offer cultural/social activities/facilities – have the possibility to do so because they exist all over the country and offer a range of activities which cater for different publics. In 2003, there were around 50 U3A and nowadays their number has undoubtedly increased.

“University Programmes” should then be read bearing in mind that the contents of the U3A programmes are undoubtedly different from the contents of the programmes the traditional universities may offer. In other words, the qualitative difference between the U3A offer and the offer which is expected from the University Programmes for Senior Citizens is crucial in this context. Traditional universities should not repeat the offer which exists in society if they wish to have senior citizens among their public. If the offers of the existing U3A and those we expect from traditional universities are intended as different, then

¹ As for the Portuguese Universities of Third Age, see Pinto 2003. In respect to the creation of these institutions in other countries, see Lemieux 2001.

the title of this Series of Lectures has been well understood. What is more, the contribution of the invited speakers is also supposed to highlight that university programmes for senior citizens should not be a mere list of (cultural/social) contents and should follow a gerontagogical approach. In fact, teachers at the Portuguese U3A are not required to receive or to possess any specialized pedagogical training for the third age and this requirement is naturally relevant because anyone who deals with any kind of public should be familiar with it beforehand and should therefore receive suitable training.

In this domain as in any other, research is obviously necessary. In fact, it is important to know the object of our study in order to pursue our goals. The following passage from Juan Sáez (this volume, pp. 60-61) may certainly help to understand the role of research in this field and to justify the inclusion of a text of mine in this volume, which should only correspond to the written version of the lectures presented by the four invited speakers, where I express some of my thoughts on the effect of literacy/education to certain extent) on cognitive aging:

“Ante todos estos argumentos, la investigación deberá proponer un catálogo de preguntas/propuestas a investigar que tienen que ver con las diversas tareas educativas orientadas a la formación de las personas mayores: ¿por qué educar a los mayores?; ¿para qué?; ¿a qué intereses se está sirviendo realmente? (la educación no es una empresa neutral); ¿qué educación dar?; ¿a través de qué estrategias?; ¿con qué recursos y medios?; ¿cuándo y dónde?; ¿qué tipo de aprendizaje propiciar?; ¿cómo llevar a cabo evaluaciones coherentes con el enfoque educativo que se utiliza?; ¿cuáles son los educadores más adecuados para estas tareas?; ¿cómo formarlos y dónde?; ¿cómo involucrar a los mayores en sus propios procesos de aprendizaje?... Estas y otras preguntas más pueden ser las que, en los próximos años, guíen la investigación gerontagógica contribuyendo a que nuestros discursos sean más congruentes, comprensivos y potentes.” (Juan Sáez, this volume, pp. 60-61)

As for the first two lectures, which constitute the contributions of the first day of the Series of Lectures, I begin by commenting on the written version of Prof. Mariano Sánchez's opening lecture entitled “Los programas universitarios para mayores en España. Algunas reflexiones para aprender de los errores ajenos”. Those who attended his oral presentation may remark that the title of the written version does not coincide with the title of the oral one. Yet, after reading the written version they will certainly understand the reason why he changed it. The text he proposes us, among other things, has the advantage of making us

aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the *Programas Universitarios para Mayores* (PUM) in Spain from the point of view of someone who knows the Spanish system very well. Finally, after my previous comments comparing the University Programmes for Senior Citizens with the programmes of the Portuguese Universities of the Third Age, Mariano Sánchez leads us to conclude that the university programmes are not “perfect”. The way he finishes his text shows his way of thinking:

“[...] los PUM no sólo deberían aspirar a formar a mayores que estén contentos, felices, satisfechos con sus vidas; sino a mayores – por lo menos algunos de ellos – capaces y deseosos de ir más allá e implicar-se – como líderes incluso – en procesos de contribución significativa al desarrollo y mejora patentes de nuestra sociedad.” (Mariano Sánchez, this volume, p. 18)

Mariano Sánchez begins his article asking several questions with regard to our beliefs about “los propios mayores”. This point is obviously important when we are concerned with the PUM. Indeed, this is a heterogeneous group. The main thing, according to him, is “lo que les diferencia, lo que, como seres humanos con vidas distintas, les separa.” (p. 3). In his words, simplifications are to be avoided.

Afterwards, he calls our attention to the way we regard university. Mariano Sánchez writes, based upon Jan D. Sinnott’s research, “para conseguir una educación universitaria a la altura de los más adultos es necesario “reinventar la universidad.” (this volume, p. 4). And he proposes a gerontagogical approach, which does not take the old person as point of departure but rather as point of arrival using communication as a means to discover the educational situation which will contribute to a permanent transformation and construction of knowledge.

He then shows us how the PUM are seen in Spain and he asserts that they are thought of in three different ways.

The first one considers PUM students the main justification for their existence and attention is hardly paid to the social environment of the elderly. The second one is concerned with providing lifelong education to those who attend the programmes with no concern for the rest of the world outside. The third one is concerned with the “reinención de la universidad” (p. 8), in the sense of a university which is for the first time intergenerational. In other words, the older people who attend the PUM try to benefit from the potential of living in a

community of generations. To sum up, Mariano Sánchez stresses the fact that these three ways of seeing the PUM translate a movement “de dentro afuera” (p. 10) with its disadvantages. For the author, they should instead be thought “de fuera adentro” and he presents six possible consequences of this new way of thinking. In this part of his article, Mariano Sánchez shares with us, in a very special way, his sociological vision of the problem, revealing a deep knowledge in a domain he excels in as the result of his continuous research.

The second text in this volume corresponds to the written version of the lecture presented by Prof. Juan Sáez Carreras, entitled “La intervención socioeducativa con personas mayores: emergencia y desarrollo de la gerontagogía”. I must begin by saying that Juan Sáez’s text should be read by anyone who has the intention of working on any university programme for senior citizens. I should even add that, among other things, this text has the advantage of clarifying different terms which are not always correctly used. The first seven pages contain a number of crucial terms linked with educational gerontology, psycho-social gerontology, gerontagogy, social pedagogy, learning and education. And, as the main topic of this article is gerontagogy, the author ends this part of his text by saying that “La Gerontagogía es nuestro campo de conocimiento; la educación o la intervención educativa su objeto de atención.” (p. 25). Juan Sáez then continues his text with explanations of the terms intervention, educational intervention, the relationship between the educational theory and practice, calling our attention to their use with regard to the education of the senior citizens. The following questions raised by Juan Sáez are worth remarking in this context: “¿de qué modo se recrea la intervención en las Universidades, lugares de investigación y formación, y en los contextos comunitarios y diferentes servicios sociales?; ¿cuál es el tipo de intervención educativa que predomina en cada caso?...” (p. 32). When dealing with the educational intervention with regard to senior citizens, it is worth noting that Juan Sáez emphasizes the role of the research in gerontagogy. And he writes: “la Gerontagogía no se desarrollará suficientemente si no da prioridad a las investigaciones empírico-analíticas y cualitativas *con, para, en y desde* las personas mayores.” (p. 33). If education plays an important role in the quality of life of the elderly, as Juan Sáez reminds us, we should neglect the model of education which is more suitable to a public – the senior citizens – which constitutes a heterogeneous group.

Among the areas of educational intervention for senior citizens, the author refers in some certain detail to University, characterised by its techno-academic orientation and presenting a formal system of education, and the *Servicios Sociales* offered by the Community characterised, on the contrary, by a non-formal type of education. At a certain moment, when Juan Sáez advocates the theory of communicative action of Habermas, and the participation and the dialogue of Freire as requisites to any educational practice, he adds that at different third age centres and associations and other similar institutions in the region of Murcia the educational offer is less techno-academic and more participative and active in pedagogical terms. In other words, these institutions have a kind of educational intervention closer to the needs of the senior citizens.

At the moment Juan Sáez writes on the “orientación colaborativa” (p. 44), after going into detail about research and collaboration in the education of senior citizens, he finishes comparing the two systems, University and *Servicios Sociales*, as follows: “si bien la vía de los Servicios Sociales parece convocar un enfoque educativo de carácter colaborativo (entre educadores y mayores, entre profesionales, políticos y gestores...) lo cierto es que no siempre funciona esta asociación, de la misma manera que el enfoque tecnocadémico no va indisolublemente ligado al espacio Universidad: en las aulas universitarias, depende de profesores y alumnos, puede ser utilizada la perspectiva colaborativa [...] y, por el contrario, en los espacios comunitarios pueden aplicarse proyectos de intervención educativa desde una orientación tecnológica, rígida y seguidista [...]” (p. 51). Following the style which characterised the beginning of his text, the author also offers (from page 52 to page 57) very useful and interesting reflections on the concept of educational necessity (“necesidad educativa”), a fundamental key in gerontagogical intervention from his perspective. At the end of this section, he itemises four principles which the identification of necessities has to take into account when the gerontagogical research is taken as an element of training and development of the senior citizens. Among the four principles, the following one is, in my opinion, the most relevant: “la necesidad de que la persona mayor esté completamente implicada en el proceso de identificación. Si esto se hace adecuadamente puede ser motivo para la reflexión profesional [...] y el balance de las competencias adquiridas en su itinerario personal, social y cultural, y en el de éste relacionado con la educación que haya recibido antes o durante ese itinerario” (p. 57). In the realm of what he calls “Líneas de exploración futura”, the author presents some challenges with regard to the

construction of gerontology. Besides pointing out the importance of the research in this field, Juan Sáez calls attention to the training of those in charge of the education of senior citizens and proposes a model of the actors and the resources which each one of them may bring to the training (“profesionalización”) (p. 63). To conclude, Juan Sáez presents seven theses aimed at rethinking the education of the senior citizens (pp. 64-76). According to the author and following Mariano Sánchez’s way of thinking, “Los programas intergeneracionales son una contingencia necesaria en esta concepción de la educación de los mayores: son la transmisión de este legado, del presente y el pasado, los que posibilitan un encuentro entre **los tiempos del sujeto de la educación [...], los tiempos del agente de la educación [...]** y **los tiempos sociales**” (p. 76). I would like to add that Juan Sáez’s contribution contains 8 pages of references (pp. 76-83). I cannot but repeat that this is a very important document for anyone who wishes to undertake gerontological studies and is a text, the reading of which I thoroughly recommend.

The moment has arrived to focus on the written versions of the lectures presented on December 3. I will start with the text by Alexandra Withnall entitled “Older learners: Challenging the myths”, which corresponds to the written version of the opening lecture. The author has a long-standing research interest in later life learning (see this volume, p. 86) and proposes, by looking at aging in a very positive way, to demonstrate that the well-known English saying “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” is not always true. She even adds that medical and educational evidence “suggests that learning in later life can have beneficial effects in terms of maintaining mental and psychological health and in helping older people to remain active and involved in their communities whatever their chronological age” (see this volume, p. 85). The aim of her contribution is to consider five myths among the many which exist about older people, and to try to refute them by means of the different kinds of evidence which are available. Yet, before introducing the myths, Alexandra Withnall begins by sharing with us what “older people” means and gives us an overview of the situation in the United Kingdom with regard to the elderly and to the living and leisure activities in later life. Furthermore, she states access to learning opportunities and, in this regard, she adds that research evidence has shown the connection between good mental and physical health and later life learning. In this context, she draws our attention to a recent development which emphasizes family and intergenerational learning. Indeed, as Alexandra Withnall writes,

"[i]ntergenerational learning, whereby older and younger generations learn from each other, is also growing in popularity in the UK as in other countries around the globe" (see this volume, p. 91). And she gives the example of a trans-national project aimed at promoting intergenerational activities. The last point she highlights before referring the myths has to do with the barriers to learning in later life. In her opinion, and I quote "it seems likely that it is the attitudes of society towards ageing coupled with myths about older people's abilities and interests in learning that constitute the most formidable barrier" (see this volume, p. 91).

Based upon her experience in later life learning, the author mentions five myths having to do with cognitive, physical, dispositional and attitudinal factors regarding the elderly. The myths are the following: Myth 1: "Older people have nothing of value to say"; Myth 2: "Older people forget things and are too slow to learn anything new"; Myth 3: "Older people have mobility problems, poor eyesight and they are all deaf"; Myth 4: "Older people live in the past and don't like change", and Myth 5: "Older people are not interested in learning". This list of myths gives us an idea of the way society is used to looking at older people and consequently to aging. Those who deal more directly with older people are naturally more aware of older people's skills and of their openness towards novelty. As Alexandra Withnall writes, it should not be assumed that as people get old they become automatically physically and cognitively impaired. With regard to learning, it is important to retain Withnall's words "teaching older people is not a one-way affair" (this volume, p. 99). In fact, they possess a "wealth of experience" and should be taken "as partners in any educational endeavour" (see this volume, p. 99). Moreover, their critical thinking skills and the use of their creative abilities should also be enhanced, as Withnall suggests when she refers to the teaching and learning techniques to be used in this population.

Alexandra Withnall's last paragraph contains a very interesting point. Indeed, as she writes, when we talk of older people we do it as if they were "an alien species" (see this volume, p. 100). But, as human beings, we cannot avoid our process of aging. I think that Alexandra Withnall could not have finished her text more wisely: "In challenging some of the prevailing myths about ageing, we are asking the all-important question – what sort of old age do we want for ourselves?" (see this volume, p. 100).

It is my conviction that research into the different aspects of aging will help us not only to know more and more about older people but also to acquire the

self-knowledge which will undoubtedly contribute to know what sort of old age we want for ourselves.

The next contribution, entitled “Capacidades conversacionales y envejecimiento” by Onésimo Juncos-Rabadán and David Facal Mayo, is the written version of the lecture presented by Onésimo Juncos-Rabadán entitled “Capacidades conversacionales en vejez. Evaluación e intervención”.

Although Juncos-Rabadán’s contribution is especially recommended for those who are concerned with older people’s learning and are neither linguists nor psycholinguists, I also highly recommend its reading to the latter because the language of the elderly should be more deeply studied by linguists and psycholinguists.

The text starts with some theoretical considerations on communication, on discourse, and on narrative, procedural, conversational, argumentative and expressive discourses. Afterwards, the authors describe conversational discourse and its main components, in order to arrive at the topic “conversation and aging”, which is presented from a cognitive, communicative and linguistic perspective. From the cognitive perspective, the authors observe, as processes involved in conversational discourse, attention, working memory and inhibitory processes, connecting them with the prefrontal areas of the brain. From the communication point of view, they consider, as processes, intentionality concerned with communicative goals, attention, and relevance, linked to what they call “cerebro social” (this volume, p. 104). As for the linguistic processes, they connect them to the language areas of the brain. A psycholinguistic model inserted in their text (see this volume, p. 105) helps to illustrate the relationships between the above-mentioned processes and the different cerebral areas connected with them.

In the next section of the text, the authors refer to conversation and aging and stress the important role played by conversation. In this respect, they write “Una comunicación efectiva es un valioso instrumento para el mantenimiento o adaptación de la red de apoyo social, y para el mantenimiento de la independencia y el acceso efectivo a los servicios ofertados (de ocio, sociales, de salud). Igualmente permitirá exteriorizar, negociando metas con los otros significativos del entorno y renegociando los vínculos afectivos más estrechos.” (this volume, p. 106). However, as the authors remind us, social and cognitive changes due to aging are also to be taken into account in terms of conversational abilities.

In the last section of their contribution, after giving us a critical overview of the different tests and tools available for evaluating the conversational abilities in the elderly the authors present their proposal of evaluation of communication in the elderly. This Spanish proposal consists of a “Cuestionario sobre relaciones sociales y disponibilidad de interlocutores”, a “Cuestionario sobre habilidades conversacionales”, and a “Análisis de habilidades conversacionales a partir de una muestra de conversación espontánea”. Each questionnaire is described in detail and the authors share with us the way they analyse the data. This is undoubtedly a proposal of evaluation which will be very helpful due to the fact that most of the tests and questionnaires which are available have been mainly created to study speakers of English as a native language, and subjects speaking other languages and belonging to other cultural environments could hardly be fully studied with those instruments. Moreover, as this evaluation proposal is aimed at obtaining such diversified and important information, I cannot but add that it is most welcome and a very useful point of departure in terms of intervention.

I would also like to add the implications of the results obtained with this evaluation proposal in respect to lexical access during conversation. Indeed, I know how lexical access and the tip of the tongue phenomenon are part of Juncos-Rabadán's research interests.

After having introduced the written versions of these four lectures, I may conclude that the four contributors have common interests with regard to older people. Indeed, they lead us to think that they need to pursue research in this population in order to improve their knowledge and apply it in their domains of expertise. Depending upon their background, we see that aging is phrased in more or less positive terms. But, to a certain extent, the idea appears that learning throughout life, following formal or non formal education systems, contributes to enhancing cognitive sustainability. This way of looking at the learning process, in which learning should be *intentional* in the sense of Bereiter & Scardamalia (1989: 363), i.e. “refer[ring] to cognitive processes that have learning as a goal rather than an incidental outcome”, and which should be concerned with a lifelong learner – “someone who has a lifelong *commitment* to learning” (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1989: 362) –, justifies the inclusion in this volume of some notes of mine regarding effects of literacy on cognitive aging. So, concerning my text entitled “Effects of literacy on cognitive aging: some notes”, I try to defend the idea of a literacy in its broader sense, in a sense that has many aspects in common with the forementioned intentional learning, if we wish to sustain

cognitive functioning and create compensatory mechanisms to optimize certain types of memory and intelligence which undergo particular developments throughout life. In addition, as I write, "lifelong learning should enhance metacognitive skills and consequently improve explicit and conscious knowledge" (this volume, p. 124). As this Series of Lectures is mainly concerned with programmes for senior citizens, in my text I hypothesize the cognitive role which computer training courses may play in the elderly, based upon what we know of their effect in the young generations (see Williams 1998:128). Still on the topic education, I draw attention to the gerontagogical approach, which does not neglect aspects such as postformal thought, wisdom and metacognitive skills. To finish, although aware of the fact that much more research needs to be done, I write "I hypothesize that education [...] should contribute, as Gomes de Matos suggests, to enhance the cognitive strengths of the elderly and to monitor their cognitive weaknesses, also helping them towards sustained, creative literacy experiencing." Indeed, it should be present in our minds that knowledge and experience also increase as a direct consequence of aging.

To summarise, what comes out from the texts included in this volume is a great concern with the elderly in different domains, and a critical view of today's situation especially in terms of learning/education. Therefore, it is my feeling that in this volume we can find answers to the questions which underlie the title of this Series of Lectures. Our societies are getting older and it is urgent not only to strive for deeper knowledge of this heterogeneous population through research covering a wide range of fields, but also to create the conditions to afford them the quality of life we would wish to have if we ourselves were senior citizens. I hope those who are in any way concerned with this population may find the five contributions included in this volume of some benefit.

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