



Big Foot – The Intergenerational Joy of Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

Big Foot - Crossing Generations. Crossing Mountains (<http://www.bigfoot-project.eu>) is funded with the support of the Grundtvig Programme of the European Commission. It is an adventurous path among the elderly and younger generations, towards the joy of teaching and learning, 'playing' and experiencing together. People of all ages are beginning to realize that the future will be different. For the first time in the history of the World, the 65+ population will be nearly equal to that of younger generations. As the Nobel Prize winning economist Robert Fogel says it best: "Stay active physically and intellectually and surround yourself with younger people", *Big Foot* shows how that intergenerational learning is beneficial for all generations where the older adults are potential resources rather than problems for the national governments.

Big Foot aims at overcoming the marginalisation of vulnerable groups and at bridging the gaps among the generations living in mountainous areas by establishing 'Intergenerational Community Service Learning' approaches helping i) to maintain physically and mentally active lives of older people, ii) to make them feel they are actually useful to society and not a burden; iii) which in turn gives them a drive to contribute to community development, while improving at the same time the wellbeing of younger generations. It is also a tool focused on community integration and social dialogue, enabling and valorising the skills and knowledge of the older generation, combining traditional knowledge with modern communication tools and expertise in order to enable innovative, creative and productive joint solutions for local sustainable development.

The Intergenerational Community Service Learning was based on an in-depth Participatory Mapping in the three pilot testing areas of the project, using a bottom-up approach allowing the entire local community and local players to express their point of views and to help defining the development course in line with their views, expectations and plans. In the consultation process all interested citizens had the chance to express their perspectives and their needs. It also provided a detailed overview of those learning activities young and elderly people are interested in and identified learning interventions based on local know-how (i.e. handicraft, small scale agriculture, folkloric activities, cooking etc), which may boost the local development in the long term. The Intergenerational Community Service Learning has been applied in the mountainous regions of Gubbio (Italy), Berkovitsa (Bulgaria) and Trikala (Greece), with excellent results so far, promoting the older generation as guardians and messengers of traditional knowledge and specific local culture to the younger generations. In conclusion, the Intergenerational Community Service Learning is a combination of the experiential learning and community services in those mountain areas, focused first on the community needs and integrating them with the seniors experience, fostering the dialogue and solidarity among the generations.

1. The Generations

"Solidarity between generations at all levels – in families, communities and nations – is fundamental for the achievement of a society for all ages"[1] United Nations, Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002. The combined effects of a rapid increase in the ageing population and a decline in birth rates are producing fundamental changes in many societies. Major economic, social, cultural, political and demographic changes have disrupted and redefined traditional family and social structures and intergenerational relationships in the last decades. The architecture and the design of communities and neighborhoods tend now to isolate individuals and families, and virtually every program and institution is organised to meet age specific needs at the expense of the richness of intergenerational practices. While intergenerational communities and extended families have long been the norm in the societies of the past, the present society is pulling the generations apart, where older adults and



children have minimal contact and activities together. Among the many factors contributing to this separation are:

- Demographic change, longevity, ageing society and workforce;
- Changing economic, insurance and welfare patterns;
- Shift from full to part-time employment; economic need for mobility and flexibility, 'modern nomads';
- Shift from a industrial to a Knowledge Society;
- Individualised/atomised societies, flexible lifestyles and changing biographies, from individuals to 'multiduals';
- Dissolving traditional family structures, single households, social isolation of the elderly etc;
- Globalisation, migration & ethnic diversity.

Big Foot strongly believes that a successful ageing society is one that prospers, includes the skills and talents of everyone and relies on a blueprint based on intergenerational learning. The older generations have been vital to the educational and care of children for time immemorial in the past, their vast stock of experiential knowledge have been an huge asset not only to the children who benefit directly, but also society generally. The involvement with children and a role in education certainly keeps the older adults active but also gives them a sense of pride and achievement that they are helping the future generations. However, improving the wellbeing of older generations is really just the other side of the same coin of improving the wellbeing of younger generations as they have a reciprocal relationship and a common ground.

Therefore, Big Foot recommends that at this stage policy adjustments are needed to reflect better those new realities, with particular attention given to developing new economic and social opportunities, strengthening patterns of reciprocity and exchange, and maintaining productive support structures and mutually beneficial relations between all generations. This is also the reason why Big Foot works towards models of good practices applied and tested in mountainous areas in Europe and afterwards to be transferred to and adapted by other European regions, that support possibilities for multigenerational contributions to society and strengthens the integration, the interdependence and solidarity among the generations and the joy of learning, thus also fulfilling the objectives set within the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations.

2. The Learning

Intergenerational learning was over centuries and still is nowadays a prime resource base for individuals, groups and the society at large. Individuals able to access and rely upon these resources and relationships increase their chances for personal and professional development; communities benefit from enlarged mutual exchange, active participation and cooperation; and societies become more cohesive and inclusive. "Intergenerational learning is a process, through which individuals acquire skills and knowledge, but also attitudes and values, from daily experience, from all available resources and from all influences in their own 'life worlds'." [2] EAGLE Consortium & Centre for Intergenerational Practice, Beth Johnson Foundation, 2007. As a consequence intergenerational learning is characterised by of the following features. It is:

- Related to interdependence and reciprocity;
- Important for pursuing common activities and growing together, where a relationship is more than a mere interaction;
- Aimed at counteracting a negative stereotype of ageing and takes into account the level of competence of the elderly and its relevance in the education of younger people. Inter-generational learning has the task of developing understanding of the attitudes of other age groups and correcting these as required;
- Oriented towards the exchange of experience so that use is made of the skills specific to each generation;

3. The Experiments

3.1 Gubbio, Italy

In Italy the intergenerational learning service has involved citizens from the Municipality of Gubbio, a town located in the region of Umbria in central Italy. Based on the Participatory Mapping the local cooking tradition was acknowledged to be the most appropriate tool to transmit the traditions linked to the cultural heritage of the area and to promote important themes such as the preservation of natural



resources, the critical consumption and the importance of buying 'local' for the entire community sustainable development.

The Municipality of Gubbio Council of Youngsters (with its members of Primary and Secondary Schools) participated to "Intergenerational Cooking Courses" led by the members of the Elderly Center. The older adults not only provided tips and skills how to become a great master chef but also equipped them with information linked to the community cultural Identity and traditions. In exchange, the young master chefs taught the older adults how to use ICTs and other Social Networking Sites.



Figure 1: Intergenerational Cooking Course in Italy

Moreover Big Foot was presented at 31st Truffle Event in Gubbio: the most famous event in Italy which celebrates the precious white truffle and the cooking traditions of the area. The youngsters coming from all Italy got the chance to cook the local traditional recipes learning from the elderly and enjoying playing and experimenting with them. Thanks to Big Foot, the Municipality of Gubbio decided to involve for the first time "the grandparents and grandmothers" during such important event, thus demonstrating a change of attitude in the decision making process and will to invest in Intergenerational Learning Services. The positive impact of the Italian experiment is also encapsulated in the feedback of the participants to the Big Foot interventions. Patrizia, 63 years old for example said: "I have got a lot to learn from you, not only how to use the PC and Facebook, but to how to keep living with the same life drive". And Carlo, 13 years old replied: "With you it is so easy to learn my mum never has the time". Or Francesco, also 13 years old years old with physical disabilities stated: "For the first time when I cook I am not the last one to finish!"

3.2 Berkovitsa, Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the interventions took place in the town of Berkovitsa, located in the North-West, in the area called the Fore-Balkan: the northern slopes of the western Stara Planina Mountain. The area is one of the poorest regions of the European Union with an high unemployment rates, with economic, social and environment protection problems. Based on the Participatory Mapping of the area and intensive consultations with local stakeholders, the Big Foot experiment in Bulgaria focused on the re-discovery of the local area features and the valorisation of it. Students from one local Middle School (i.e. from 3rd to 7th grade) and senior citizens- the latter avid lovers of the region as well as members of the local organisation of tourist veterans from Berkovitsa and the nearby villages- were involved in the Big Foot excursions (one to two days duration). The seniors, from one side, guided the youngsters, sharing with them historical information, legends and poetry as well as their knowledge on the local fauna and flora, thus developing their appreciation and love for the environment, while the youngsters, from the other side, showed to the seniors how to use digital and video cameras and the GPS navigation. Moreover, the students, under the guidance of ICT professionals, have helped seniors to acquire basic digital competences such as communicating through the Internet and other Social Networks.



Figure 1: Intergenerational Excursions in the Mountains of Bulgaria

The participants stated: "I found new friends. I have never been on Zdravchenitza peak before and I loved it."; "I saw part of our region, extremely beautiful and varied. I learned many legends about it." and more: "The feeling of being in the nature as a participant of the Big Foot activities is indescribable; it fills you with vigor, energy and good physical activity."

3.3 Trikala, Greece

Trikala is a mountainous and semi-mountainous area in the northwest part of Thessaly in Greece, full of unique historic monuments, such as the Meteora Rocks with its monasteries.

The Greek experiment was organised around four thematic sessions i) traditional local products and gastronomy; ii) folklore culture e.g. traditional handcraft; iii) rural heritage and historical monuments; and iv) natural environment and regional rural tourism, which took place once a month. The target groups involved in the experiment were Primary and Secondary school students as well as elderly adults belonging to rural women association, local product workshops, family distilleries of Tsipouro, local folklore museum of Pialia, the Open Care Center for Elderly in Kalambaka, the woodcarving school of Kalambaka and individuals researchers of the area's tradition and history. The school students and teachers after having discussed in class the above thematics, participated to the excursions on the field. During those experiential sessions the elderly adults provided the youngsters with the specific knowledge on traditions, local customs and "stories" that are risking to be lost due to the intergenerational gap.



Figure 3: Intergenerational Learning in Greece

Through this process, the youngsters had the chance to collect information and get aware on their local history and heritage, traditional recipes and folklore music.

The director of one of the primary schools involved in the project pointed out that "Many young students have lost their relation to the countryside although Trikala is not New York. However, he



added "I believe that the traditions could be an opportunity against the current crisis". She suggested that "activities like these should keep on going in the future!"

4. The Conclusion(s)

The Big Foot Experiments on three highly different European grounds have been providing strong evidence to support the benefits of intergenerational learning for individuals, their communities and societies at large such as:

- Uniting segregated generations and building better understanding between generations;
- Encouraging active citizenship and social participation;
- Encouraging cross-generational working;
- Sharing societal and professional resources, tacit and explicit knowledge among generations;
- Challenging social problems cross-generationally;
- Addressing different social & e-Inclusion objectives and competence areas simultaneously;
- Supporting Lifelong and Life-wide Learning;
- Maintaining & building human and social capital simultaneously.

It finally also Big Foot demonstrated that what really matters is the participants personal experience and the appreciation of the local cultural and natural heritage: this is what makes the project success.

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