

THE THIRD AGE UNIVERSITY OF SLOVENIA

The third age university, the first attempt at the democratisation of adult education

When in 1992 Slovenia separated from Yugoslavia, the process of democratization of adult education intensified. It would be inaccurate to pretend that it started only after this date. Some trends in adult education were namely announcing the future political changes. Thus The Third Age University movement in Slovenia came into being. This was the first vast civil and educational movement, through which an attempt was made to introduce changes into formal education, focusing on the individual, his or her learning and life, re-establishing the value of voluntary work of the elderly and other social groups, changing the public images of the elderly, changing the understanding of the role of education in one's life.

In 1984 it was for the first time that we gained public attention to the need of general adult education and to the need of lifelong education. Nowadays it has become a movement intended for all those in the third life period, or state who do not work for living, who do not have paid work, and in some places these universities have changed into intergenerational structures. Their contribution to the image of the learning adult and especially to the role of culture in education in our country has been very important.

Origins

Several reasons prompted the founding of the Third Age University in Slovenia. Its origins date back to the creation in 1984 in the Centre for Foreign Languages, Ljubljana, of the first study circle (the French language studz course) for the retired, led by the mentor Dušana Findeisen. In the mid eighties aspirations towards democratisation of Slovenian society and education became increasingly pronounced, coinciding with the emerging "political spring" of nations in socialist countries. Repressive policy of the regime's rightest frantion whose pressure from 1976 forward concentrated in particular on the school system, education, importation of foreign literature and persecution of intellectuals, left the retired unaffected, thus allowing more room for action and, ultimately, for the creation of the Third Age University.

The democratisation of education in Slovenia can therefore be said to have actually started with study circles at the Third Age University. They brought the idea of "edutainment" (education with joy) on the Slovenian social and cultural scene and encouraged individual educational and cultural pursuits. Adults other than pensioners, as well as children in the schooling system, thus had an opportunity to see functioning an individual centered education that starts from the student and is adjusted to him, in contrast with the state-set programmes of instruction and educational coercion prevailing in their immediate environment.

One of the reasons for the foundation of the Third Age University was the growing awareness among the public of the need for lifelong education. As there had been no lifelong education intended for people in later life, the implementation of the concept of education for the elderly considerably changed the view of it.

Another pertinent reason was the need to prevent social exclusion and marginalisation of pensioners and to give them an opportunity to go on with their active and socially participative life after their retirement.

A rather formal reason for the foundation of the Third Age University was a rapid increase in the number of pensioners and a sharp downward shifting (down to the age of 45) of the early retirement age. Slovenia has today 530.000 pensioners out of its total population of two million.

Close long-standing contacts between the Adult Education Department of the Ljubljana Faculty of Philosophy and experts in other European and North American countries and UNESCO have provided an opportunity to follow the development of adult education elsewhere. In this respect, the French and German experience and attainments in third age education have been invaluable.

The Third Age University was formally founded in 1985 within a non-governmental voluntary organisation called the Adult Education Society of Slovenia. The activity of the University was carried out through forms of voluntary work which during the nineties won social support in the newly created state, and in line with the European endeavours for

promoting self-organisation, voluntary work and the setting up of societies in former socialist countries.

The foundation triggered off an avalanche of spontaneous reactions by mentors and students. The number of the applicants grew so rapidly that it was difficult to handle. The media, to which the education of pensioners appeared a peculiar phenomenon, gave the event prominent coverage in TV and radio programs, newspaper reports ... The news about the foundation of the Third Age University was spreading fast, changing the attitude to and prejudices against the elderly, opening up the possibilities for a new quality of life, new ambitions and new prospects for the elderly.

Structure and Organisation of the Third Age University

The University was first founded in Ljubljana and that is where the coordination and development service for the entire country started operating. The activity of the University began with a one-year training of prospective mentors. Shortly afterwards third age universities were opened in Maribor and Velenje, followed by smaller towns in other parts of the country. The Association of Third Age Universities of Slovenia today includes 27 universities and is joined each year by a few new members. Students attending study circles number more than 17.000, and the Third Age Universities appear in 25 towns. As heads of programmes endeavour to maintain the original quality of educational work (small groups, close interpersonal relations, active forms of education), waiting lists are a common occurrence at all the third age universities. Qualified mentors and adequate premises are searched for concurrently. Programmes are expanded gradually and carefully, and new study circles are formed only after the necessary conditions have been secured.

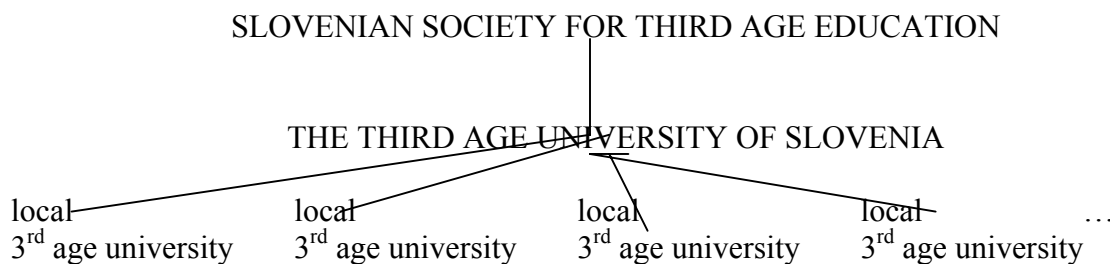
In organisational terms, the Third Age University is now operating within the Slovenian Society for Education of the Elderly in the framework of which other forms of education are also being developed, such as pre-retirement education, leisure-time education and inter-generational tandem education where the elderly represent an inexhaustible source for the implementation of lifelong education for young people as well.

Study circle is the basic organisational cell. Experts have chosen this democratic form of education in small, intimate groups after the model of Swedish study circles and socio-

cultural animation as practised in France. What is original, however, is the network of *amateurs*, chosen students issuing from each study circle, working on a voluntary basis for the benefit of their group and for the university as a whole.

One of the study circles is responsible for lining with media, covering various issues related to the living of the elderly. Some of the study circles, however, have been concentrating on the education for voluntary work and social inclusion. There are others, like educational camps, summer university, study trips, cultural tourism, lectures, occasional seminars, etc.

Structure of Activity of the Society for Third Age Education



- PRE-RETIREMENT EDUCATION
 - INTER-GENERATIONAL TANDEM EDUCATION
 - EDUCATION OF MENTORS
 - EDUCATION OF PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH THE ELDERLY
 - EDUCATION OF THE ELDERLY FOR VOLUNTARY WORK
 - SUMMER RESIDENTIAL THIRD AGE UNIVERSITY
 - PRACTICAL TRAINING FOR STUDENTS OF ADULT EDUCATION SCIENCES
 - INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND EXCHANGES
 - RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY
 - PUBLIC CAMPAIGNING
 - PUBLISHING
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A study circle comprises 10-14 students interested in the same subject. They join in of their own free will and choose the field of study in accordance with their own inclinations. The circle is led by the mentor. One of the students assumes the role of animateur, maintains contacts with other study circles and the administration, and attends to the implementation of ideas and suggestions for more active forms of study. If circumstances so require, communication between the mentor and the study circle goes via the animateur. Information

flow along formal and informal lines. The students and the animateur meet outside the study course too.

Quality of Education

Close interpersonal relations, curiosity and satisfaction with the progress attained are common to all study circles. The circles function as primary social groups, students displaying a marked sense of belongingness, mutual care and shared joy. Courses take place once a week, and outside them students associate with each other according to their preferences. Judging by research data, study circles function as relatively closed groups. They are not open to other study circles or joint services. Links between different study circles are established mainly through those students who attend several circles and through joint evening lectures, joint excursions and other occasional forms of companionship. The latter are rather superficial in nature (Krajnc, Findeisen, Šantej, 1992).

Research shows that mentors find great personal satisfaction in working with study circles. It is psychologically rewarding and enriching work through which they brace for efforts required at their regular workplace, in the family and in public life. Students and mentors are both eager to extend their engagement at the Third Age University over a longer period. First generation students (from the year 1984) still keep in touch with the University. Their knowledge of the French language had so improved by the year 1996 that they were able to translate Slovenian poetry into French. There are almost no dropouts of study circles, for study becomes a way of life for the attendants (Mijoč, Findeisen, Krajnc, 1994).

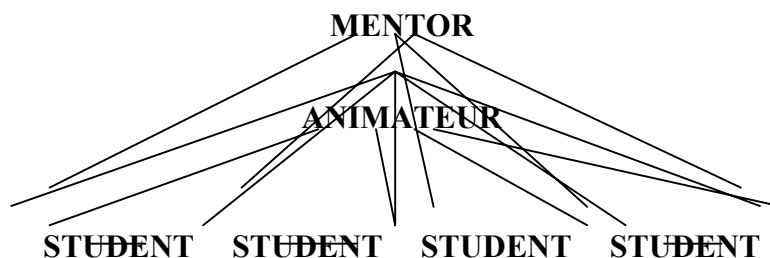
Years spent in study circles perceptibly influence personal growth and development of new traits in some students. Thus, for example, they become more self-confident and self-assertive, their attitude to the environment and their self-perception change, their ambitions and the ability to set goals increase, and they develop new interests. Close interpersonal relations in study circles leave deeper traces, too. Students often recognise that they have learnt things they never believed they would master (Findeisen, 1977).

Achievement Evaluation

The age of students at the Third Age University ranges between 45 and 85. Candidates aged between 85 and 92 appear only rarely. The evaluation of individual study circles has revealed that despite their age old people learn foreign languages very quickly if the mentor does not rely on mechanical memorising but on a complex perception associated directly with personal experience. An important factor in the study of languages is the motivation to learn a language and continue studying it, using informal, individual sources and learning modes such as listening to the radio, watching foreign TV programmes, travelling and experiencing the native language and cultural environments, visiting exhibitions, reading foreign magazines, establishing contacts with foreign sources via the internet etc. The results achieved by old people sometimes stand comparison with the results of four-year language study in primary schools where foreign languages are taught as compulsory subjects (Findeisen, 1997).

The fields of knowledge which students at the Third Age University in Slovenia are interested in studying are similar to those in other countries.

Study circle organisation chart:



People change their view of the world and life upon retirement. They look inwardly, taking stock of their unrealised ambitions and long-cherished interests. The environment changes rapidly and in order to cope with it they must understand it, otherwise they would feel even more insecure. These considerations largely determine the choice of educational programmes. Desirous to enhance their abilities for communication with the world, the elderly often study foreign languages, learn how to improve proficiency in their mother tongue, attend study circles for creative writing, correspondence and journalism, and gain skills in pottery,

sculpture, painting, music, dance and ornamentation. Through these various activities they seek to impart to others the wealth of their personal life experiences.

Another group of programmes has developed out of a common wish to understand the world better. Interest in the study of history and geography is perceptible. The art history programme records the largest enrolment. Other study circles within this group deal with psychological and sociological topics, interpersonal relations, futurology, computer technology, philosophy, parasciences and mysticism. The range of programmes is very wide and depends on the availability of appropriate mentors, i.e. those who are prepared to cooperate with students in study circles as closely as they expect them to.

Guidelines for Further Development

In the opinion of associates of the Third Age University, the major tasks ahead for the University are: to expand programmes by including natural sciences and technology, to establish closer cooperation with the local environment, to promote the role of the elderly as teachers in inter-generational programmes (the elderly as an untapped well for lifelong education), to expand the network and open new third age universities in localities where they do not exist and, given the growing needs of this segment of the population, to create conditions for a larger number of prospective students to be admitted to the University.

By introducing new organisational forms such as the Seniors' Club (advisors and experts), the service for periodic activities, and various projects involving inter-generational linking and cooperation we expect to provide greater possibilities for the application and public recognition of knowledge and for self-realisation of the elderly.