Franz, Julia; Scheunpflug, Annette

A systematic perspective on intergenerational learning: theoretical and empirical findings

A SYSTEMATIC PERSPECTIVE ON INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS[1]

JULIA FRANZ, ANNETTE SCHEUNPFLUG

Abstract

Intergenerational learning is a growing field of practice across Europe. Against a background of demographic and social changes within European countries and the subsequently altering learning processes between different generations in families, communities, and workplaces, educational organizations face the challenge of providing learning opportunities for the different generations. This paper presents research related to the development of intergenerational learning programs in German adult education organizations. Within that project, adult educators from different organizations took part in a training module on intergenerational learning and subsequently created intergenerational learning programs in their own organizations. In this paper we provide insight into the training program of the participating adult educators, as well as into the results of our empirical study. First, we present the systematic framework of intergenerational learning that was used in the training module to initiate the development of practical intergenerational programs. We then present our research design and the results of the qualitative study. Finally, we discuss these results in terms of theory.

Keywords

Intergenerational learning, adult education, training, empirical research

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[1]   This paper is based on an international conference paper. Therefore, it is a re-publication in some parts, but it integrates a systematic model of intergenerational learning which was not previously published internationally (cf. Franz & Scheunpflug, 2015; 2013).

Introduction

European societies are experiencing significant demographic changes because European birth rates are decreasing while the average life expectancy is increasing (cf. Muenz, 2007, p. 1). These shifting age profiles may affect models of family structures and of living together (cf. Spéder, 2003). A multilingual compendium on the concepts of generations, intergenerational relationships, and generational policy (Lüscher et al., 2015) reflects upon that development and emphasizes the meaning of generational identity and the implied ambivalences (Lüscher, 2011). Based on the changes in the quantity and quality of intergenerational relations, it has been argued that intergenerational learning processes should be supported explicitly by educational organizations (cf. Klercq, 1997, p. 87). Within this context, recent years have seen the development of new concepts of intergenerational learning in schools and adult education (Franz et al., 2009; Marquard et al., 2008).

Research concerning intergenerational learning has been divided in two main fields:

– *Research projects with a focus on the transmission of knowledge within families.* These studies analyse the transmission of family knowledge, habits, and success through qualitative research designs (cf. Büchner & Brake, 2000; Brassett-Grundy, 2004).

– *Evaluations of intergenerational programs beyond family relationships* (cf. Hatton-Yeo, 2006). The aim of these projects is to strengthen the bond between older and younger generations in schools and community development projects (cf. McBain, 1996; Friedmann, 1999; Newman, 1997; Newman & Brummel, 1989; Granville, 2002). Predominantly, these studies measure the respective attitudes of younger and older participants towards the other generation (cf. Couper et al., 1991; Gorelik et al., 2000). The emerging field of intergenerational learning in adult education is still a very young field of practice with little extant research.

Our empirical study is situated within that context. It focuses on people who organize intergenerational learning for different generations in German adult education organizations. The research questions of the empirical study were: What implicit concepts of and orientations towards intergenerational learning do adult educators have? How do they arrange intergenerational learning within institutions of adult education pedagogically? These questions were processed within a development and research project related to intergenerational learning in adult education in Germany. This project was funded by the Ministry of Education and Research, and was conducted by the Catholic Working Committee for Adult Education. Within that project, adult educators from different organizations took part in a training module on intergenerational learning. They subsequently created intergenerational

learning programs in their own organizations, reaching about 272 participants from age four up to age 92. The project was evaluated by the authors (cf. Franz et al., 2009).

In the following paper we provide insight into the training program of the participating adult educators, as well as into the results of our empirical study. First, we present the systematic framework of intergenerational learning that was used in the training module in order to initiate the development of practical intergenerational programs (2). We then present our research design (3) and the results of the qualitative study (4). Finally, we discuss these results in terms of theory.

Training the trainers:
a systematic description of intergenerational learning

During the development and research project, 15 adult educators from several organizations participated in an 18-month training module on intergenerational learning. They had several courses concerning the theoretical backgrounds of generation, learning, and pedagogical aspects. They subsequently developed, conducted, and evaluated their own programs within their organizations. In order to foster an understanding of intergenerational learning, we developed the theoretical framework that was presented in the training module. This framework provides a systematic perspective of intergenerational learning by clarifying and combining theoretical understandings of generations and learning. We will describe it in detail.

The concept of generation

In everyday life, the term *generation* divides younger and older age groups. This differentiation describes age cohorts and offers no distinct understanding of the term generation. In the German discourse of social science, the concept of generation is understood in three different ways (cf. Liebau, 1997).

One concept of generation is genealogical. It refers to the genetic succession of family members. Its meaning goes back to the Latin origin *generare* meaning to generate or to originate. With that concept, a micro-sociological perspective is preferred. From that point of view, generations are related family members: grandparents, children, and grandchildren.

A second concept is pedagogical. This concept characterizes generations as learning connections. Generations come together for learning purposes. One generation takes over a teaching role, while the other generation acts as learners. This idea is connected with the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his lecture about education, he asked the question: "What does the older generation actually want with the younger?" (Schleiermacher,

1966, p. 9). This question implies a unidirectional learning process between generations. The older generation transfers knowledge and experience to the younger. For dynamic and so-called postmodern societies (cf. Lyotard, 1979) the strong connection between age and knowledge is no longer adequate. Nowadays, every generation can learn from another.

The third concept is *historical-sociological*. It refers to different groups in a society as generations. Karl Mannheim (1928, 1964), who invented this theoretical perspective in the beginning of the 20th century, argued that generations are categorized by their collectively shared political and cultural experiences.

Conceptual approaches to intergenerational learning

Intergenerational learning involves conceptual approaches to the learning process between different generations (cf. Meese, 2005). First, it is possible that generations learn from each other. This approach highlights the fact that one generation is able to inform and support another generation. Second, generations can learn with each other. The participants are working and learning together on topics that are new to the whole group. Third, generations can learn about each other. Learning about each other means focusing on the historical and biographical living conditions and experiences of another generation.

A systematic table of intergenerational learning

The table of intergenerational learning below illustrates the combination of the concepts of generations and the conceptual approaches to learning.

Table 1
Intergenerational Learning

	Learning from each other	Learning with each other	Learning about each other
Genealogical concept	a)	b)	c)
Pedagogical concept	d)	e)	f)
Historical-sociological concept	g)	h)	i)

In the training module, we used this table to differentiate the various pedagogical concepts of intergenerational learning and to introduce ideas and examples of practice. In this paper, we will include current examples of good practice.

Genealogical learning from each other

This combination describes a common case of intergenerational learning in families. One generation transmits knowledge and experience to the other. Traditionally, the younger generation learns from the older. In postmodern times, this direction reverses within families. For instance, the older generations learn from the younger how to use computers or smart phones. Examples of good practice are found in family education centres, when grandparents point out aspects of nature to their grandchildren during hikes or when grandparents and grandchildren cook together. In addition to this family learning arrangement, the genealogical perspective can have an effect on workplace learning, when the relationships of older and younger colleagues follow the structure of family roles, such as when older colleagues provide "fatherly advice."

Genealogical learning with each other

In this combination, family members learn with each other about new topics. Weekends for grandchildren and their grandparents provided by family learning centres are examples of genealogical learning with each other. One current example of good practice is the "Digital Families" initiative by the Campaign for Learning in the United Kingdom.[2] Families are supported by online methods to get along in a digital world and to become "Digital Families" together.

Genealogical learning about each other

The aim of this combination is to learn something about the experiences, attitudes, and life backgrounds of one generation. One example is the international initiative "Grandparents Day in School."[3] Grandchildren get to know and appreciate the historical experience of their grandparents by interviewing them or writing essays. The grandchildren present the results of these processes at a special school event. Another demonstration of genealogical learning about each other can be seen in the different tools used to encourage learning processes between generations. The use of family photos[4] in the Intergenerational Learning Programme of Dublin City University is a good example of this.

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[2]   http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/cfl/fl/projects/digitalfamilies.asp
[3]   http://www.grandparentsday.org.au/get-involved/schools/
[4]   https://www4.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/community/pdfs/PresAwPoster24.pdf

Pedagogical learning from each other

Within this combination, two generations come together so that one generation can profit and learn from the other. In the field of intergenerational practice, these *mentoring* projects differ among family, community, and workplace learning. In *family learning*, older people support children as godparents or act as social grandparents, supporting families who have no related grandparents living locally. In *community learning*, older people support adolescents in the passage from school life to work life in different local communities (Zucchero, 2010). In *workplace learning,* many mentoring programs have recently emerged, such as programs in which older female managers support younger women in their career development and other programs where older and younger engineers are brought together to keep up a circle of innovation and tradition and to share the knowledge of senior workers (cf. Geeraerts et al., 2016).

Pedagogical learning with each other

In this combination, two generations come together to learn with each other about topics that are relevant for the whole group. An example of good practice is the Intergenerational Learning Programme of Dublin City University. Its aim is to engage students and older people from the wider community in teaching and learning together in a third-level environment. In different modules, the students and seniors are learning with each other about different topics such as Life Online, Music, and Lifewriting.[5]

Pedagogical learning about each other

This combination focuses on the narration of biographical and historical experiences of one generation to another. A common example for this field is when older people act as contemporary witnesses and talk about their subjective perspectives about historical events, such as World War II or the Cold War. It is possible to use such ideas for community learning: older people could share their stories about special locations within the community, and younger members of the community could tell their stories about the same spot. By doing so, an integrational and biographical learning process is taking place and older and younger community members learn about each other. This idea can also be fruitful for workplace learning when older and younger co-workers talk about their perspectives concerning the development of their workplace.

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[5]   http://www.dcu.ie/education_studies/ilp/index.shtml

Historical-sociological learning from each other

In this case, members of different generations learn from each other. Pedagogically working with the historical-sociological concept of generation often means working with biographically-oriented methods. This can be easily done in every kind of project by asking, "What historical events have influenced your collective identity?" Historical differences emerge at the surface and structure the discussions about the diverse living conditions of different generations.

Historical-sociological learning with each other

In this combination, different generational units are brought together to learn about generative themes (cf. Freire, 1970). One example is the project "Songs of Generations."[6] A couple of days each year, Polish and German participants ages 20 to 99 meet in Krzyżowa/Kreisau to discuss the political, historical, and biographical meanings of their favourite songs. In this way, they are able to reflect generation-specific point of views on society.

Historical-sociological learning about each other

In this field, a museum is the institution that provides the opportunity to learn about other generations because it presents objects that represent the symbols of former generational units. This idea can be adapted for community and workplace learning, when an intergenerational group presents an object or artefact of their community or their workplace that has important meaning in their biography.

The advantage of this table is that it provides a structure for thinking about and planning intergenerational learning. It makes it possible to see systematically the opportunities that intergenerational learning offers for learning processes in families, communities, and the workplace. This strict differentiation is helpful for planning or thinking about intergenerational projects. In the actual practice of intergenerational learning, this strict differentiation becomes indistinct: even if a project focuses on a concept of learning with the other generation, in most cases the participant will also learn from and about the other generation.

In the training module, the table provided a means of reflection on the project ideas of the participating adult educators.

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[6]   http://www.kreisau.de/en/projekte/nachhaltigkeit-genereationendialog/lieder-der-generationen/

Research Design

In our research, we wanted to discover which orientations adult educators have in terms of intergenerational learning and how they arrange learning processes for different generations. Therefore, we chose a qualitative-reconstructive research design (cf. Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Silverman, 2004). In order to learn more about these orientations, we conducted group discussions and interpreted the empirical material against the background of the documentary method (cf. Bohnsack et al., 2010; Wilkinson, 2004).

The combination of group discussions and documentary interpretation methods was based on two methodological assumptions: first, that it is possible to analyse and reconstruct adult educators' collective and conjunctive forms of knowledge concerning intergenerational learning; second, that it is possible to differentiate between theoretical and conjunctive forms of knowledge in the transcript data (cf. Mannheim, 1928/1964). Theoretical knowledge is conceptualized as a form of knowledge based on mental attitudes which are easy to express. In contrast, conjunctive knowledge is grounded in implicit experience-based and habitual orientations. These forms of knowledge direct the way adult educators implicitly act and teach and are not easily accessible. The documentary interpretation method allows the reconstruction of these implicit forms of knowledge.

The study sample consisted of 12 groups and focused on two different perspectives (concerning the theoretical sampling method, see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first perspective was that of the adult educators. Group discussions were conducted with four groups of educators who had no experience with intergenerational learning—and therefore no systematic perspective on that topic—and with three qualified groups who took part in the further education course concerning intergenerational learning. The second dimension of the research focused on analysing the perceptions of the participants regarding intergenerational learning. To contrast this with the perspective of the adult educators, five group discussions with participants were conducted. Additionally, all 272 participants responded to questionnaires and several intergenerational projects were observed systematically.

The group discussions of the adult educators were used as the initial point in the process of generating ideal types of intergenerational learning models. Sequences with similar topics from each group discussion were analysed comparatively. In the comparison of how each group talked about intergenerational learning, different views about the idea and role of generations as well as about the role of adult educators came to the surface and built the basis for identifying ideal types. The group discussions with participants were used to contrast and complement these ideal perspectives. The participants' responses to the questionnaires and their observations served as the basis for the evaluation of each project and as context information for the comparative analysis.

Results

After comparative analyses, it was possible to identify three *ideal types* (cf. Weber, 1904) of intergenerational learning models, based on the orientations of the adult educators and the participants. These ideals are formed from characteristics and elements of the given learning projects, but do not correspond to all of the characteristics of any one particular case. These types can be described as (cf. Franz, 2010):
– a support for family learning;
– a link of different generations by working on generative themes; and
– a guided exploration of difference.

In all three types, intergenerational learning is arranged in various pedagogical ways, for different groups of generations, and with varying objectives. These differing learning models are introduced below.

Intergenerational learning as a support for family learning

The first model of intergenerational learning describes support for family learning. Intergenerational learning is understood as an implicit learning process between grandchildren and grandparents or between children and older people. The adult educators provide an open learning situation focused on the cooperation between children and older participants or between grandchildren and grandparents. Within this model, reciprocal learning takes place. The results show that this model is the common understanding of intergenerational learning among non-qualified adult educators, as can be seen in the following sequence from a non-qualified group, in which one person (Bw) has experience with an exchange program for children and older people:

Bw: *Really, this exchange this (…) it has the first priority. We arrange a meeting every four weeks to provide the possibility for exchange of the adults and the children.*

Aw: *This is far more than an informal process; this is a really (….) organized learning process.*

Bw: *Yes. For sure. We meet once a month with all participants.*

Cw: *And what happens during such meetings?*

Bw: *We do different things. Before Christmas we made cookies.*

Group Discussion: Inexperienced Adult Educators 1, (77–111)[7]

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[7]   Since all group discussions were conducted in German, the passages have been translated by the authors.

In this sequence, intergenerational learning is primarily understood as an exchange process in which the participants are enabled to learn implicitly. Our further analysis shows that some qualified educators also arranged family learning models for intergenerational learning, as illustrated in the example below.

In a one-week seminar entitled "Between Fast Food and Fair Trade," grandmothers and their grandchildren were invited to a family education centre. The participants learned facts about regional products and the basics of nutrition. During the week, the members played food games, talked about their favourite dishes, bought regional products from the market, and prepared and cooked a meal each day. The grandmothers showed their grandchildren several cooking skills.

This example shows how adult educators arrange intergenerational learning by providing an open learning space, setting the topic, and focusing on the cooperation between the generations. In the group discussion with adult educators who provided such learning spaces for members of different generations, they observed that learning between the generations happens incidentally while the generations are cooking and playing together and that the elderly assumed parental roles.

The participants in projects like "Between Fast Food and Fair Trade" enjoyed the time spent together, as could be seen in their responses to the questionnaires. The children described the fun they had playing and cooking together with their elders, and the grandmothers were glad to be able to pass on their knowledge to the children.

Further analysis of the group discussions showed that this kind of intergenerational learning seems to be suitable for children and older people. Children are able to learn various skills by participating in shared activities with older people, while the older people and grandparents enjoy the contact with children and the transmission of practical knowledge. However, this is not the case when adolescents and their grandparents come together. From a psychological point of view, adolescents orient themselves toward their peers and start to separate themselves from family models (cf. Kessler, 2005). Therefore, they need other kinds of interactions to profit from intergenerational learning.

Intergenerational learning as a link of different generations by generative themes

Within this model, different generations are connected by working on generative themes. The expression *generative theme* originates from Paulo Freire (1970). It refers to topics that are important for a group.

> Dm: *Uhm in my project it was very important that the generations worked together practically on their topic [developing a radio show]. They walked into the town and collected statements from pedestrians and talked about that later. That helped to connect the generations, because on the way into the town they had several small talks about their topics. Therefore, I would arrange it in that way, rather than to provide some ex-cathedra teaching about the topic. It is better to connect old and young with a generative topic, while other processes happen along the way.*
>
> Group Discussion: Experienced Adult Educators 1, (105–119)

In this passage, Dm explains the idea of connecting generations by working on a learning topic that is relevant for the whole group. Such adult educators arrange learning situations in which different generations can work on those topics, as shown in the example of practice below.

The project "Detectives of Energy" reached out to participants from ages four to 90, all from a small village. For four days, they worked together on the topics of energy and sustainability. The participants went on excursions and held discussions on the production, consumption, and wastage of energy worldwide. During the first two days of the project, both generations learned about the local perspective of sustainability by visiting a regional hydroelectric power station, the local river, and a local energy farmer and his biogas plant. Due to its local involvement, the intergenerational perspective was very important for the project. The knowledge of the elderly about the local area was given value by means of a story-telling round in which the 80- to 90-year-old locals told their stories about the old river and the building of the hydroelectric power station. In the last two days, the participants created an exhibition on the topic of renewable energy in their village for other locals.

Adult educators who link different generations using such themes assume that by working together on one topic, all of the participants are able to include their own generational perspective on the discussed topic. Therefore, this intergenerational learning model addresses all generations as target groups, not only young and old generations. Further, the educators assume that different generation-specific knowledge can enrich the learning process of all generations. To reach all generations, intergenerational learning models provide an open but *locally embedded* learning processes. The inclusion of all generations, each with their own needs, expectations, and learning abilities, challenges adult educators pedagogically, since it raises the need to offer alternative learning possibilities for some participants, depending on the learning situation.

From the participants' perspectives, there are many demonstrations of the value of this learning process. In their responses to the questionnaires, the participants mentioned that they appreciated the experience of learning about

the history of their own social environment, as well as about the perspectives of the other generations.

Intergenerational learning as a link between different generations involves working with a topic that addresses all age groups and generations. To ensure that participants explore, accept, and develop a generative theme, it is useful to embed it in a local social environment. This combination might then lead to an intense intergenerational learning process as well as to an increased feeling of social cohesion within the community.

Intergenerational learning as a guided exploration of difference +

The third model identified from empirical analyses enables guided experiences of differences and otherness. In this model, adult educators develop learning projects for adolescents and older people. In these arrangements, differences in the ways the generations work together are identified and reflected. This can be seen in the following sequence.

Dm: *We have had the experience that different generations have also different expectations of the process of learning together, especially in terms of reliability they somehow clashed within the group*

Bw: (. . .) *hmm* (. . .)

Dm: *works* (. . .) *That does not mean that the adolescents were not reliable, but they had a different perception*

Aw: (. . .) *hmm* (. . .)

Dm: *of time frames for working together* (. . .) *after that was clarified in the whole group they could work*

Aw   (. . .) *different ways of working* (. . .)

Dm   (. . .) *together in a better way.*

Group Discussion: Experienced Adult Educators 2, (566–600)

From this passage, it is obvious that differences between the generations have effects on the learning process. The adult educators describe their task in clarifying those experiences in order to initiate reflective learning processes. Another project example illustrates this ideal type.

The project "Towards a Fair City" invited members of the municipal youth committee and the local senior citizens committee of the city of Münster in Germany. The aim of bringing these politically engaged groups together was to discuss different topics and to determine which political issues they could work on conjointly. A one-day event was organized to be the starting point for the intergenerational political process. In the beginning, the adult educators created a setting in which the generations could get to know each other, for instance by interviewing the other generation. They subsequently

worked together in small groups on different current and political topics related to the city, such as education and infrastructure. In their discussions, participants brought in their own generation-specific points of view and reflected on them with the other generation. At the end of the day, they presented a set of topics on which they would like to work together in the future.

Adult educators from this type of practice assume that adolescents and older people have different ways of thinking and abilities because they experienced historical events differently. While focusing on shared issues, the project enables participants to explore differences in experiences and perspectives. This assumption leads to an explicit pedagogical practice that visualizes intergenerational differences. This is arranged by a variety of methods, for example, giving the participants the task of reflecting on certain subjects from their generational perspective, of interviewing each other, or of reflecting on the most important historical event that had a biographical meaning.

Participants in these projects valued these explorations. In response to the questionnaires, the older participants said that learning with the younger generation forced them to rethink their own orientations, and the younger people mentioned that they were starting to reflect on the meanings of their generational unit.

The perspective of intergenerational learning projects as models for experiencing differences both values and reflects the heterogeneity of different perspectives. By enabling participants to experience the perspectives of other generations, it is possible for the participants to understand and become familiar with the other generation as well as to reflect on their own orientations. Therefore, this kind of learning arrangement enables those involved to meet postmodern challenges such as appreciating and valuing difference and dissent.

Discussion

These results provide insights into the perspectives of responsible educators in explicit intergenerational learning courses. The findings enrich the discourse about intergenerational learning by focusing on the professional perspective. In addition, we find that each model of intergenerational learning implies a different conception of what is meant by the term generation. These concepts implicitly structure the interaction and, therefore, the learning process between the generations. These models might help in various ways to cope with demographic changes through educational practice.

Intergenerational learning as a support for family learning

In family learning models, two different theoretical concepts of generations are implied. A genealogical concept of generation is inherent. The empirical results further show that this concept is important even if the participants are not actually related, but simply fulfilling the social roles of grandparents or grandchildren. The adult educators who worked with children and older people reported that children get in contact with the older generation easily, sometimes by calling them granny or grandpa. Moreover, it seems that the children expect to learn from those grandparent models. The second theoretical concept of generations is pedagogical. In the learning environment, the combination of both concepts leads to a learning direction in which the children learn almost naturally from the elderly. The results in terms of family learning models indicate that these models might help to compensate for changing family structures if children without grandparents have the opportunity to learn from older people who act as social grandparents. Within these models, the older people support the children in, for example, improving their reading skills in school or their knowledge about nature. On the other side, the elderly stay active and engaged by being in contact with the children, by transmitting their knowledge, and by taking responsibility for the younger generation.

Intergenerational learning as a link between different generations

A model to link different generations by generative themes implicitly contains a sociological-historical concept of generation. In this learning model, the concept is valued by the assumption that by working on the generative theme, the participants will bring in their biographical and historically-shaped experiences. In such a learning model, the focus is on a collaborative learning process with different generations from a local social community. The empirical results show that this model alone reaches the generation in the middle. All generations work together on generative and therefore conjunctive themes that are important for the participants in their social environment. By working together and developing the theme further, the participants can introduce their own biographical and historically-shaped points of view. These models are based on ideas of participation and inclusion. Due to their local involvement, they seem to be a bridging concept between institutional adult education and community development projects. Against a background of demographic and social changes, such models might help to strengthen the reciprocal understanding of different generations as well as the social structures within their communities. Therefore, this type of intergenerational learning might help to increase social cohesion locally as well as informal and non-formal learning processes between generations.

Intergenerational learning as a guided exploration of differences

A learning model that focuses on enabling experiences of difference implies a sociological-historical concept of generation, and the adult educators explicitly use this concept pedagogically. They visualize the historical and biographical differences in terms of orientations, beliefs, and perspectives among the generations in order to encourage an experience of difference, which is an important basis of intergenerational learning processes between adolescents and older people. The plurality and diversity of values, beliefs, and perspectives is appreciated and practiced within the pedagogical concept. Especially in societies that experience dynamic changes on different levels, learning and coping with plurality, otherness, and difference is important for every generation. The experience of difference is crucial for educational processes because the processes tend to sensitize the participants to differences between old and young. In institutional learning surroundings, participants are able to reflect on and tolerate differences, which seems to be a foundation for learning processes in postmodern, complex, and ambiguous societies.

Conclusions

The presented study shows that the systematic framework we provided in the further education course might help to expand ideas about the intergenerational learning conceptions of adult educators. Accordingly qualified adult educators tend to develop differentiated models of intergenerational learning and to overcome the idea that intergenerational learning only takes place within family structures. Additionally, the research reveals that the three types of learning models imply different understandings of generations. Therefore, it might be useful to reflect upon those understandings in intergenerational programs as well as in evaluating projects.

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Corresponding authors

Julia Franz
Institute of Educational Sciences, Eberhard-Karls University of Tübingen, Germany
E-mail: julia.franz@uni-tuebingen.de

Annette Scheunpflug
Faculty of Human Sciences and Education, Otto-Friedrich-University of Bamberg, Germany
E-mail: annette.scheunpflug@uni-bamberg.de