

Citizen Senior Researcher

Materials for seniors' educators



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Project description

Project *KA204-C4F4E254-EN Erasmus+*

Project title:

Citizen Senior Researchers – raising the competences of senior adults and incorporating them in research and analytical activities under the label of citizen science.

Aging is a fundamental challenge facing modern societies, where the abilities of older people (65+) need to be better developed and used in activities. Effective engagement can lead to many positive goals, such as helping to maintain the overall well-being of older people. Participation in research projects called citizen science can play an important role in activating seniors, especially those who feel they are left behind because they do not understand new developments or how these events will affect their lives or how to use some of the newer technologies .

To address the above challenges, the consortium members intend to carry out a study in the consortium countries to diagnose the situation - such a study has not been done before. The result of the conducted research will be a didactic material that will contain a methodology on how to educate seniors, good practices on how to increase the popularity of volunteering among the elderly, a program path dedicated to seniors. The project provides for a test phase - suggestions from the handbook will be used in practice in the form of a workshop training for educators.

The potential long-term benefits of the project are as follows:

- a) promotion of life - lifelong learning among seniors
- b) activation of seniors through participation in scientific research projects
- c) popularizing citizen science among the scientific community in the countries represented in the project.

In order to maximize the dissemination of project results, two dissemination events will be organized for participants outside the consortium. An important feature of the intended project is to bring together institutions from countries with different experience and achievements in the field of seniors' involvement. This will allow for the development of a universal solution to the universal challenge of the longevity revolution. Consortium members have a unique opportunity to engage older people in science in a way that can benefit both individuals and society.

Methods of developing recommendations

The recommendations contained herein are the result of several months of work of the team implementing the project: "Citizen Senior Researchers - raising the competences of senior adults and incorporating them in research and analytical activities under the label of citizen science".

In the course of the project, we conducted a social survey on an international group of seniors and consulted with experienced trainers cooperating with the elderly. The effects of our work were also consulted with researchers, trainers and representatives of specialized non-governmental organizations during workshops for educators.

1. Survey

The study was carried out by an international partnership consisting of researchers from Bulgaria (Centre for Research and Analysis), Czech Republic (Prave ted! o.p.s.), Poland (Innovation Centre Mill of Knowledge and RISE Foundation) and Slovenia (Ljudska Univerza Kranj). The study was conducted at the turn of 2021 and 2022. The report along with the recommendations was developed in May 2022. The study involved 196 elderly people from the four countries mentioned above.

2. Workshops with educators

As part of the project, before the pilot phase of the tools for carrying out the citizen science research, workshops for educators dealing with the issues of the elderly were carried out. During these meetings, we presented a survey report and our recommendations. We consulted methodological issues regarding conducting classes with the elderly, and we exchanged good practices regarding the organization of classes for seniors.

3. Consultations with experts

Before developing final recommendations, we consulted with several specialists experienced in working with seniors. They were mainly academics representing such disciplines as pedagogy (andragogy) and sociology.

How to prepare workshops for seniors?

1. Recruitment

Many institutions pointed out that even with the best ideas for activities for seniors, you can often experience problems with attendance at classes. Therefore, an important element of project planning is reaching the recipients. In the case of older people, the communication channels should be chosen carefully. Older people tend to be less proficient in using new media. It is easier to reach them using traditional information channels. It is good practice to hang information posters or leave leaflets in places frequented by seniors. Information poles, trams or spaces of public institutions (e.g. public library, public institutions) work well for this. The best practice, however, is to establish cooperation with institutions where seniors often visit: universities of the third age, senior clubs, libraries and community centers organizing meetings for seniors.

2. Frequency of classes

When organizing classes for the elderly, you should consider their frequency. Seniors are often interested in cyclical activities, but the intervals between individual activities are important to them. The least interesting for them seem to be classes in the course mode, where you have to meet every day for a certain period of time. Optimally for the elderly, classes should be organized weekly or bi-weekly, and certainly not less than once a month. If classes are held too often, seniors may not be able to attend all meetings. In the case of activities taking place too infrequently, they may lose the sense of continuity of meetings.

3. Lecturers

The selection of teachers is one of the key elements of the organization of education processes. In the case of seniors, it is worth betting on experts or well-known people (at least in the local environment). Seniors appreciate meetings with people with extensive experience in the subject in question.

The analyzed good practices show that it is worth diversifying the age of the respondents. Seniors are attracted to both meetings with young people, but with specific skills, and with very experienced experts of an age similar to the listeners. The lecturers, however, should be provided with a way of narrating the older people's abilities: to speak in the simplest possible way, to use examples, to present research results, and to keep complex theoretical issues to a minimum.

Another good practice is to evaluate (qualitatively or quantitatively) lessons with experts. These surveys are useful to find out which providers are particularly favored by beneficiaries. On the one hand, it is good to rely on the effect of freshness and invite more and more new speakers. On the other hand, experience shows that it is attractive for older people to re-meet with already known teachers who are preparing new classes. Thanks to this, it is possible to establish even better bonds with selected groups of beneficiaries.

4. Workshop topics

Our analyzes show that older people are particularly interested in activities in two thematic areas: health and culture. In addition, some seniors are interested in modern technologies, but in this case it is good to research the needs of a given environment in which you want to conduct activities.

Seniors are also very eager to get involved in projects concerning local issues and civic activities. This group shows a special commitment to social issues. Seniors are equally eager to participate in projects aimed at intergenerational integration.

How to work with seniors?

1. Mini lecture

This method is used for a short presentation of the issue by the lecturer. It is worth using additional materials and knowledge in a nutshell - a multimedia presentation can be useful for presenting data. During such a mini-lecture, it is worth signaling which issues are worth special attention or will be useful later in the course. Lectures should usually not take up the entire duration of classes, it is worth combining it with more active and engaging methods of work.

2. Tasks in pairs

The basic argument for using this technique is that it is better to think together than alone. Thanks to the exchange of ideas, we can learn from each other and broaden our horizons. Cooperation should give us a sense of security and, consequently, help us take up challenges. Working in groups gives workshop participants time to think and discuss the problem with others. The effects of work are more complex and well thought out.

3. Group tasks

Just like working in pairs, the method of group tasks strengthens the ability to cooperate and integrates participants. Seniors motivate each other to act. Well-constructed tasks and appropriate division of roles make everyone feel important and fully engaged during the workshop. Participants can share their insights and experiences. Small teams (e.g. 4-5 people) give a better chance for each of the participants to have their say. Working in a group teaches co-responsibility and additionally motivates to perform the assigned task in the best possible way. We distinguish many methods of group cooperation. Below are some popular and effective working methods:

- Brainstorming – this method allows you to present any, even absurd, idea to solve the discussed problem. What is obvious to us may be innovative to others or may be perceived in a completely different way. When using this method, it is important to end it at the right moment, because usually in the later stages, the ideas appearing

start to become less and less realistic and no longer support the decision-making process.

- Mind map – is a graphic way of presenting associations and thoughts related to a given issue. In other words, it can be called a mental map.
- Decision tree - the use of this technique supports participants in making difficult and ambiguous decisions. This method is used not only when working in a group, but also when solving problems on your own.
- Poster technique - participants are given the task of creating a poster on which they have to put a solution to a given problem. They can use slogans and fragments of text as well as graphic elements (e.g. drawings, diagrams).
- Snowball method - participants are first to think through a given problem on their own, then they work in pairs, and finally in fours. The final solution to a given problem is presented by the whole team.

4. World Café

World-Café is a workshop method suitable for groups of twelve to over a thousand participants. It involves carrying out a structured process of conversation. Their goal is to facilitate open discussion in intimate conditions. It brings together ideas gathered in a larger group to access the "collective intelligence" of the participants. This method focuses more on researching or innovating on a topic than on solving existing problems. The form is basically designed as a forum for creative thinking. Scenarios where there is a predetermined answer should not be used. The World Café space should be inviting – like the atmosphere in any coffee shop (e.g. small round tables covered with writing cloths, blank sheets of paper or sticky notes in different shapes and colors, pens and markers). The duration of such a meeting ranges from forty-five minutes to three hours.

5. Discussions

Discussion is a method of conducting workshops based on an exchange of opinions between participants, regardless of whether the issues spoken are their own views or refer to the opinions of others. The discussion will become valuable when the discussed issue is slightly

controversial and arouses the interest of the participants. The condition for a successful discussion is, above all, a good formulation of the topic: it cannot be too difficult, it cannot refer to new information, it cannot contain incomprehensible concepts and terms. At the same time, the topic cannot be too easy, because it would be too quickly resolved. Each discussion should end with a summary, which is a brief overview of the results and how it was conducted.

6. Research walks

It is a field method of asking residents for their views on specific issues. They are used primarily to study space (e.g. towns, parks). It is worth using this method when you want to assess the space through the eyes of its users (e.g. in terms of adapting it to the needs of the elderly, people with disabilities, or assessing specific architectural or infrastructural solutions). It is also valuable when it is necessary to gather ideas for new solutions in the way of space development (e.g. location of new benches, public transport stops or street lighting). Research walks allow the user to perform a "space audit" and allow them to submit various solutions, taking into account the needs of the users themselves. Recommendations from such consultations will help local institutions design new or improve existing solutions in spatial development.

Tips on the course of classes

1. Duration of workshop

An important issue when planning educational processes with seniors is to determine the appropriate length of individual classes. First of all, it is important to remember that older people find it more difficult to maintain attention. Therefore, the units should not be overloaded with content, should not last too long, and should be divided with breaks reasonably.

Lectures should ideally last 45 to 60 minutes. A short break can be arranged during them. Workshops are best when they last from 45 to 90 minutes. When planning longer forms, it is worth ensuring that they are rich in active forms of action. In particular, it is worth combining participants in pairs and groups, so that they have time to discuss together and work on the given problems.

Usually, when organizing classes for the elderly, it is not worth significantly exceeding 120 minutes. Seniors are rarely able to allocate so much time during the day. Such longer meetings should be balanced in content, combine lecture elements with other more active forms of work. It is also worth taking care of breaks and activities integrating the group.

2. Breaks

Breaks during educational activities are of great importance, especially for older participants. On the one hand, they allow you to relax after intensive mental training and assimilation of new knowledge or skills. On the other hand, they allow for integration with other class participants, educators and project organizers.

Our experience shows that when working with seniors, you should take breaks at least once every 60 minutes. It is optimal to take a break after about 45 minutes of classes (especially if a lecture is being conducted). Participants need to rest in order to maintain a high level of perception of the transmitted data in the next part.

3. Mixing working methods during workshops

We proposed a catalog of methods to be used in working with seniors in the previous chapter. Here, however, we would like to point out that when planning workshops for seniors, it is worth diversifying the classes. It is good practice to use several methods to combine the transfer of knowledge with learning new skills, and to show how to use them in practice. Particularly valuable are tasks focused on working in groups, where seniors can use collective knowledge, exchange observations and propose jointly developed solutions.

4. Homework

As it has been mentioned before, elderly people are quite busy and plan their weekly schedule of tasks in detail (often additionally associated with paid work, caring for grandchildren, helping other family members or friends). Therefore, it is problematic to give them homework in the course of educational projects. Good management of these types of tasks is especially important in citizen science projects.

If we decide to do homework, we must remember that they should not be too time-consuming. They can also not require too much focus and energy, because seniors usually prefer to spend their free time resting or doing private matters. This does not mean that they are not willing to do additional activities at all. However, they must be interesting and engaging for them. It is good that such homework allows them to gain additional knowledge, and not just be a form of data collection for scientists.

General thoughts

1. Senior empowerment

An important role of educational activities for older people is to show that they continue to play an important role in society. People of post-working age often struggle with the problem of marginalization or the feeling of being left behind.

In particular, engaging in activities in the spirit of citizen science can help seniors regain a sense of empowerment. Knowing that they help scientists solve important problems, the elderly may feel needed again.

Such projects at the same time equip seniors with knowledge, skills and tools that will allow them to better implement numerous grassroots initiatives in the future. Often, people involved in such projects can become local leaders of social activity and move others to act for their small homeland.

2. Having a good time

It is worth remembering that older people have already passed the most important stages of education and quite a lot of professional experience. As part of their free time, they rather look for opportunities to have a nice time, develop their interests or engage in activities that are valuable from their perspective.

In particular, involving them in scientific processes, including citizen science, should take the form of fun and interesting spending time, not hard, complicated research work. The tools offered to senior researchers should be as simple as possible to complete and should not take them too much time. At the same time, the subject of research should be engaging and important to them or their local environment.

3. Intergenerational integration

Participation in educational and social activities for the elderly is not only an opportunity to gain new knowledge, but also an opportunity to contact peers. Thanks to educational projects, seniors have a chance to meet new people with similar interests. Joint participation

in workshops often results in establishing friendly relations. Thanks to this, the elderly gain friends with whom they can also go for coffee or to the theater after classes. This is especially important for people who live alone on a daily basis and do not always have anyone to talk to. Social contacts increase their comfort of life and sense of security.

4. Integration between generations

Participation in projects is also an opportunity for seniors to meet younger people. This allows for a better exchange of knowledge and experience. On the one hand, educators are often young people who can pass on knowledge about the modern world and new technologies to older people. On the other hand, they are always willing to listen to seniors' stories and their observations about the changing world.

When carrying out activities for the elderly, it is also worth thinking about involving representatives of other age groups in them: children, youth, adults. Intergenerational projects are valuable, especially those involving entire families. Thanks to this, family members get to know each other better and can develop new friendships with other people, often their neighbors or residents of the same town or city.

5. Involvement in matters important to the local community

Referring to the previous information, it is worth emphasizing that a positive element of the planned activities is the inclusion of participants in local matters. The beneficiaries, especially the elderly, willingly act for their little homelands. At the same time, thanks to this, they have a sense of influence on the surrounding reality. By gaining subjectivity, they can also show themselves as active citizens in their local environment. Often they can also move other, younger people to action.

However, it should be remembered that there is some risk of such actions. Bottom-up initiatives, even the most valuable ones, sometimes fail, encounter social or administrative obstacles. It is therefore necessary to ensure that people who are deeply involved in actions for some changes do not feel the negative effects of a possible fiasco.

6. Additional attractions

A good practice that will ensure a lot of interest in the proposed activities is to include additional attractions in the project. Sometimes even the most interesting stationary classes are not fully attractive to the recipients. The most effective form of additional activities in projects are sightseeing trips or study visits. It is worth using this type of activity to deepen knowledge about the basic subject covered by the activities. Other valuable attractions are also walks and meetings in the open air - they allow participants to integrate and change the perspective of looking at the world around us.

7. Repast

When inviting participants to longer meetings, it is worth thinking about organizing refreshments. It doesn't have to be a lavish buffet! It is enough to provide drinking water, boiling water, coffee and tea. Small cookies are always good too. Our experience shows that if the budget allows for such expenses, it is worth ordering small donuts or yeast croissants from the local bakery. Such refreshments provide a more homely and integrating atmosphere than packaged cookies (and at the same time we will support local entrepreneurs, not large corporations).