Western University

Scholarship@Western

Final Projects Summer 2023

LIS 9704: Librarianship and Evolving Technologies

Summer 2023

Bridging the Gap: A Guide for Teaching Seniors

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Introduction

We have probably all been in a situation where we have tried to explain an electronic device to an older relative. The experience is almost always frustrating for both parties. The younger person has grown up with technology and intuitively knows how to use it, while the older person struggles to grasp even simple concepts. The experience usually leaves both the teacher and learner feeling exasperated and like time was wasted.

These ineffective teaching experiences are the result of several factors. There is the impatience on the part of the teacher who cannot empathize with the older learner who does not have the same intuitive knowledge of technology. There is the aggravation of the older learner who does not see why this new technology is even necessary. And there are longstanding stereotypes that precondition both the teacher and learner to what is even possible.

This guide, using peer-reviewed sources, will offer potential solutions and methods for teaching seniors. These methods can be applied to any learning activity, but they will be most relevant to lessons centred around technology such as phones and computers.

Addressing Stereotypes

This is a story from my family that is actually very relevant to this subject...

When I was very young, we did not have cable TV. We simply could not afford it, so we were dependant on unreliable antenna signals to watch TV. Because of this, whenever we visited my grandmother, she would always have video tapes with children's shows that she had recorded for me. She was in her mid-60s at this time, and she was a master of the VCR. She was the only one in our family who could use this machine to its full potential. We all knew how to set up the VCR to record a certain channel, but she could program it to start recording on one channel at a certain time, then stop and start recording on another channel later on. She would go through the TV guide looking for anything that might be of interest to my family since she had cable and we didn't. The significance of this is that she was a senior, but she was more than capable of using new technology (at the time).

This story is one family's personal experience, and it is in no way universal. But the importance of this story is that a senior was not just using technology but had full mastery of it. For anyone planning to teach something to older adult learners, it is important to examine your biases, and make no assumptions regarding the learner's abilities.

Society has long accepted the adage that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." This attitude is rooted in ageist thinking and discourages lifelong learning. These negative stereotypes

predispose older adults to the belief that they are unable to learn something new, and it causes younger people to put no faith in older adults learning new things.

These stereotypes cause immense harm to older populations, as they serve to maintain the digital divide. A 2015 report in the U.K. referred to digital technologies as a double-edged sword. "On the one hand, digital technologies provide access to local resources and services… On the other hand, several key barriers to successful engagement with technologies still exist: a lack of understanding in how digital technologies work, a lack of skills to make the best use of available resources, and the affordability of technologies" (Lisbeth Drury, et al, 2017, 2).

One method of combatting these stereotypes is through intergenerational programmes, "which bring together the older population and younger generation with an aim to share experiences, educate, support and engage with each other in the context of digital technologies" (Drury, et al, 3). These programmes can help to dismantle stereotypes about older adults, but they also run the risk of reinforcing them. With younger adults trying to help seniors use technology (something seniors are consistently portrayed as struggling with), this can reinforce that stereotype. Older adults themselves can internalize these stereotypes and become convinced that they are unable to understand technology. This is known as 'stereotype threat,' "which occurs when an individual is anxious they may confirm a negative stereotype about their social group… and subsequently underperform on the stereotype relevant task" (Drury, et al, 9).

These negative stereotypes are not just social, but systemic as well. Public libraries will need to adjust the way they perceive older adults. "In previous decades, senior citizens were considered any individual over the age of sixty-five years old and were categories as having all the same features, needs, and wants" (Jalesia Horton, 2018, 180). Libraries and society as a whole must abandon these generalizations and view every person as an individual.

A prime example of older adults defying stereotypes is Olive Bryanton. Bryanton was featured in the CBC documentary *Never Too Old* for her work as a PHD student at the age of 81. According to Bryanton, people don't want to grow old because of the way older people are treated by society. This vicious circle perpetuates itself through ageist attitudes amongst younger people that are internalized by older adults. For us to move forward, we must unlearn what we know before we can learn anything new.

How Seniors Learn

Part of dismantling these stereotypes and generalizations around older adults is examining what learning methods work best for them. If teachers can meet the needs of their students, the students will be more receptive to learning.

One study (Horton) noted that preferred learning methods amongst older adults include:
1. Hands-on learning methods
2. Learning for the joy of learning
3. A desire for improved quality of life

4. Preference for group work and self-directed learning
5. Immediate application of new skills

That group work is a preferred learning method is particularly noteworthy, as this relates to the intergenerational programming in the first section. The intergenerational programmes were found to produce mixed results, sometimes helping young and old to engage with one another, but sometimes actually contributing to stereotypical perceptions of older adults. This preference for group work indicates the importance of learning with peers. Older adults are less likely to suffer from stereotype threat if surround by their peers.

Seniors also generally prefer hands-on learning. Everyone who has tryed to teach an older relative how to use a device has been accused of "going too fast." Older adults respond better to learning if they can take part in the instruction, rather than just being lectured to.

The relevance of the subject matter is of key importance. As noted above, older adults have a desire for improving their quality of life and putting their new skills to use right away. If younger teachers can explain why the subject matter is important, and how it will help the older learner, then the learning process will be much easier.

Finally, it is important to remember that seniors generally learn for the joy of learning. For younger adults, learning is more closely associated with mandatory activities, such as going to school. Older adults have not been in school for quite some time, and the pursuit of new knowledge is completely voluntary. The process should be comfortable and enjoyable. It's not homework, so to speak.

Best Practices for Teaching Seniors

Having reviewed how seniors generally prefer to learn, and the stereotypes that act as barriers to learning, it is time to discuss best practices for teaching seniors, focusing particularly of technology. One learning model for seniors learning technology is the STELA model (Senior Technology Exploration, Learning and Acceptance) (Hsin-Yi Sanday Tsai, et al). This model (see Figure 1) focuses on "the attitudes towards learning, the availability of training and support, exploration, and experienced difficulty of learning" (Tsai, et al, 732). This model can be used to determine whether there will be successful learning and acceptance of technology.
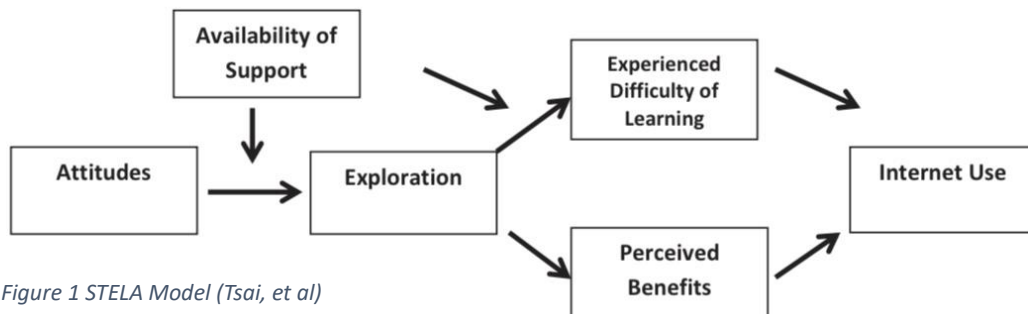

Figure 1 STELA Model (Tsai, et al)

As demonstrated in the STELA model, the first step is to address any misgivings the older learner may have about learning something new. As stated earlier, these stereotypes can be internalized. Instructors should create an environment that is welcoming, encouraging and patient. "The social environment influences how an individual perceives themselves in terms of learning abilities and self-efficacy. If an individual's self-perception is too negative, then the person will not start with the learning process. Instead, the individual will reject the technology as being too difficult" (Tsai, et al, 2019, 730). The learner's attitude towards technology determines the success of the entire teaching process.

The next step is ensuring that the learner is able to explore and experiment with the technology (Tsai, et al). Public libraries are especially valuable in this instance as they provide access to computers (and sometimes other devices) for patrons to use without having to invest in a device themselves. "A key aspect of learning is access and the opportunity to learn from trial and error" (Tsai, et al 732). By providing access to the devices, libraries offer older adults the chance to learn in a low-stakes environment.

In addition to providing access to the devices, libraries should provide regular instruction. Library programs offering tech help should be held on a regular basis and at all library branches (if the library system has multiple branches). Having supports in place is an important part of the learning process, and many seniors come to the library because they have no other supports available.

After ensuring that the learner has access to the technology to freely explore, and that there are supports available, the next step is to demonstrate the value of the technology to the older learner. This is done through engagement with the learner. Allowing them to describe their lifestyle, needs and wants, misgivings and goals enables the teacher to explain the relevance of the technology to the learner. "The perceived benefits of new technologies are not always obvious to older adults as many have gone throughout their entire lives without using digital technologies" (Tsai, et al, 732).

Convincing a late internet user of the importance of the internet can be a hard sell, so engagement with the learner is important. Once the learner is engaged with the teacher, the teacher can better explain the importance of this technology. Explaining the relevance of the technology is also easier if it is done in a group setting. An older learner may be more inclined to learn to use technology if they see their peers also learning to use them, rather than just listening to what a younger person says.

The perceived difficulty of the learning can make or break the process. For a person who has been using technology since childhood and continually adapting with it, it is challenging to see how difficult it is to older adults. However, patience is of the utmost importance when teaching older adults, or anyone for that matter. Guiding, rather than showing, is the best method of teaching an older adult to use technology. As noted above, older adults tend to prefer hands on learning, so it is important that the learner complete the tasks themselves.

Patience must also extend to the entire learning process, including the learner's attitude. For example, many seniors become frustrated with learning new technology, and teachers must remember that "frustration level may not indicate discouragement, as some people see a difficulty as a challenge that they want to overcome" (Tsai, et al, 740).

By applying the preferred learning methods of older adults to this learning model, instructors should be able to effectively teach older adults to use technology. Instructors should be prepared with a lesson plan, so that they are properly prepared. Lesson plans should include learning outcomes focused on the individual lesson, rather than the overarching goals of the teacher and learner.

Encouragement for Teachers

Computers have integrated themselves so completely into our day to day lives that it can be difficult to remember that this was not the case, not so very long ago. The latter decades of the twentieth century saw a slow integration of computers into our lives that was limited to professional spheres. But the twenty-first century has been defined by computers rapidly inserting themselves into our personal lives.

For older adults, this can be frightening. Thirty years ago, computers were just tools used in certain professions, but now "the ability to use technology is important for people to be included in today's digital society" (Tsai, et al, 728). This is the digital divide at its worst, preventing seniors from participating in society when social and systemic ageist attitudes are what prevent them from adopting new technology.

Despite the prevalence of these ageist attitudes, it is important to not place too much on the shoulders of those teaching technology to seniors. "It has to be borne in mind that as people age, their memory, attention, speed of thinking, the capacity of perceiving and remembering the new information, of shaping new skills and improving already available ones goes down" (Olga A. Anikeeva, 2019, 2). The sad reality is that not all of the preconceptions surrounding older adults are without merit.

The ability to learn new concepts becomes progressively more difficult in the later years of life. Other issues, such as declining mobility, eyesight, and hearing, make adopting technology not only more difficult, but less of a priority. As seniors rely more and more on family and caregivers for completing tasks, the ability to navigate the internet hardly seems of much importance.

Teachers should have realistic expectations when teaching seniors to use technology. There is, sadly, no denying that some people will be unable to ever grasp these concepts. That is to say nothing of conditions such as dementia, which ultimately make it impossible to teach someone something new.

It was previously stated that teachers should remain patient during the teaching process, and this is still true. However, teachers should also have firm boundaries in place for their own

wellbeing. Frustration can be part of the learning process, but it can also progress to anger and verbal abuse. No service performed by library staff should take precedence over the staff member's wellbeing. If a patron becomes angry at being unable to learn a concept, then it is best to end the lesson.

Additionally, many seniors may seek out technology help not out of a desire to learn to use digital devices, but for the company. This is indicative of the plight of isolation amongst seniors. But, for those teaching seniors to use technology, it is important to remember that they are not working in the capacity of a social worker. Staff can refer patrons to other services but should in no way feel obligated to fulfil that role.

Furthermore, the relationship between the teacher and learner is professional, not personal. That does not mean that there cannot be a positive relationship, but the teacher should not feel obligated to engage with (or disclose) highly personal information. Staff are well within their rights to end a lesson if they feel uncomfortable.

If the instructor is unable to impart the subject matter to a senior learner, it does not reflect on their abilities as a teacher. Stereotypes around older adults are so ingrained into our society that even seniors can internalize them and believe them. The attitude and abilities of the learner determine whether the learning outcomes can be met, and the instructor should in no way feel that they have not met the expectations of their job.

Conclusion

There are longstanding biases regarding older adults. This is especially unfair because everyone will (hopefully) grow old one day. That we can assign these stereotypes to an entire demographic of people knowing full well that we will one day be part of that demographic shows just how unfair and short-sighted society is.

This short-sightedness also shows a lack of appreciation for the past. We express exasperation with seniors for not adopting new technology, ignoring the fact that when they were younger this technology either did not exist or was so niche that it was not relevant.

If we are to treat our elders with fairness, we must deconstruct the biases that we hold surrounding their learning habits. We must provide opportunities for them to engage with new technologies and be patient as they learn to use it at their own pace. Until these biases and stereotypes have been removed, we perpetuate a negative attitude that prevents real learning from taking place.

We must ensure that there are enough opportunities for older adults to engage with this technology. This includes providing access to the devices and providing assistance. A helpful attitude can make all the difference to someone struggling with a new concept.

When teaching seniors, the teacher must take into account how seniors learn best. Hands-on work, group work, clearly demonstrating the value of the technology, and having a patient and welcoming environment will be of the most assistance to senior learners.

But, for all of these negative stereotypes, it is important to remember the limitations being dealt with here. We all slow down in our later years, and, sadly, there will come a point when we can no longer adopt new practices. Teachers of older adults must be mindful of this and accept that they will not be able to help all of their students.

Technology is important, and everyone deserves the chance to interact with it. Longstanding prejudices need to be pushed aside to give older adults the opportunity to engage with new technology. The future belongs to all of us, and nobody will witness all of it, so there is no reason why our elders should not have the chance to be as tech-savvy as the rest of us.

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[1] APA Style

Reflection

I chose a user guide for teaching seniors as my final project because I have first-hand experience with this. As I mentioned in my project proposal, I organized a program at my hometown library (Norfolk County Public Library) teaching seniors how to use their devices. The program was a success, but I had to develop it all on my own. There were limited resources for teaching seniors beyond the usual platitudes (be patient, go slowly, etc.). A "how-to" manual would have been of immense help.

One of the biggest problems I encountered while teaching was people putting themselves down. They would say that it was beyond them, and they wouldn't even try to learn. I wish that I had been better prepared to combat this self-deprecation. Stories like Olive Bryanton, going for her PHD in her 80s, would have been great as confidence boosters.

I already knew not to show my students what to do, but rather explain it to them so that they could do it themselves. My sources confirmed this as a preferred learning method amongst seniors. Group learning as a preferred method was something I didn't know about, but it makes sense. It's easier to learn if your peers are learning the same thing. And explaining the relevance of the tech to their lives is a great way of overcoming that reluctance to engage with technology.

I didn't go into my teaching sessions with any lesson plans or models. I was flying by the seat of my pants the whole time. At the time, I thought that drop-in, one on one sessions wouldn't need much planning. Now I know that a booking system to determine what they needed help with would have worked better, as I could have built a lesson plan around their needs.

When I started writing this user guide, I wanted to make sure that I included encouragement for the teacher. I was able to find plenty of resources on teaching seniors that weren't available in a public library, but I knew that there would still be struggles for the teacher. It was important that the guide provide reassurance for the teacher that cannot make headway.

My own grandmother had dementia (the same one who had mastered the VCR), so I could recognize some of the early indicators in the people I was helping. I knew that anything I taught them was unlikely to stick. I also knew that it wasn't my fault. But for teachers that have not had experience with dementia, I wanted to make sure that they knew it wasn't their fault if they couldn't successfully teach a senior.

I also wish that I had known that frustration was part of the learning process. I encountered many patrons who would grumble and complain while I was trying to teach them. I was very surprised when one of them told a co-worker that I was an excellent teacher. It's important to note that frustration can be part of the learning process, because it shows how different it is teaching adults compared to teaching children. Children have to sit quietly and listen to their teachers, but adults are used to speaking their mind.

I also want to reiterate that it's important to set boundaries. I ended sessions with patrons because their language was becoming abusive, and there were times I said that I was unavailable for assistance rather than deal with certain people. This guide isn't just about helping senior learners, but it's also about helping those teaching seniors.

Writing this guide was both enlightening and frustrating. Researching the ways that seniors learn was an eye opener. There were so many things that I didn't know and I wish that I could put them into practice. But it was also frustrating to see how much I had missed when I was running the START program at NCPL (Seniors, Technology And Resources Today).

I'm not sure exactly where I'll end up working now that I'm finished the MLIS program. If I end up back in a public library, I will definitely apply what I've learned for this project to my work. Even if I don't end up working in a public library, I may still share this with my hometown library. Another staff person took over the tech help sessions when I left, and I'm sure that this information would be appreciated.

I am considering academic libraries as a career option, and this is a field that I would be interested in pursuing further. This could be a research project if I become an academic librarian where publishing is a requirement. Considering that we'll all grow old (hopefully), I'd say that more research into this is worthwhile. Our later years could even be healthier and more fulfilling if we have the foresight to take care of our minds and bodies while we're young.

Most of all, I hope that this guide could serve to end the idea that seniors can't learn new things. It definitely becomes harder to learn new things the older you are, but it's not impossible. Dementia is a horrible disease that robs so many people of opportunities later in life, but it doesn't affect everyone. We need to do away with this idea that life just stops once your grey hairs start to appear. I think a lot of seniors lose interest in pursuing more learning because they see it as something reserved for the young. I definitely have encountered adult patrons who see books and learning as something juvenile. If we can dismantle this false assumption, then we can open up so many more opportunities for adults of all ages. We always tell people to act their age, and to many this means limiting what activities they can pursue. But, C.S. Lewis had this to say on the subject…

"When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up."

Maybe if we can encourage people to keep that sense of childlike wonder about the world, they will want to continue learning new things in their later years.