

## Workshops for the Elderly: Benefits and Development Opportunities

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**Abstract:** For decades, numerous studies have shown positive aspects of aging. These findings, along with the development of new theoretical approaches, open up new opportunities for older adults to engage in various projects in the educational and social fields. Learning is not only considered possible for older adults but is also one of the main factors contributing to competent aging. The right to education holds special significance for older adults, representing an opportunity for updating, social participation, and reaffirmation of their potential. This paper aims to address the theme of education in older adults. Firstly, a conceptual and historical development will be carried out, describing its expansion and diversification in Argentina. Subsequently, existing educational proposals for older adults will be described, along with the benefits they provide through participation. To do this, findings from national and international empirical studies exploring the physical, psychological, and social impact of attending educational workshops will be presented. These findings demonstrate multiple benefits in various areas, particularly in the social one. The importance of educational workshops in promoting the social inclusion of older adults, and fostering participation, empowerment, and personal development is concluded.

**Key words:** older adults, education, benefits, development

### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, education has had a socializing function, aimed at forming and integrating individuals into society. These conceptions led to adult education developing later compared to that of children and youth. Educational practices directed at older adults were also influenced by the prevailing negative conception of the aging process until recently. Villar (2004) considers that one of the reasons for the late inclusion of older adults in the educational field is related to the notion that education was confined to certain stages of life and not others.

According to the traditional conception of development, an individual's life cycle is divided into three stages: acquisition, stabilization, and decline. These correspond educationally to 1) a stage of formation, where individuals acquire the knowledge and skills to be used in adulthood, including childhood, which could extend beyond adolescence; 2) a stage of production, where individuals are integrated into society and dedicate themselves to executing the potential accumulated previously to achieve their personal goals, identified with maturity years; and finally, 3) a stage in which individuals leave the productive sphere of society, either to rest or engage in activities with no productive or paid purpose, corresponding to old age, to the years after retirement. This imagery contributed to early proposals for older adults to be primarily recreational.

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However, in recent years, the offer of workshops for older adults has expanded and diversified, and thus, it has shown a wide variety of proposals involving cognitive stimulation, mindfulness, social skills, emotional aspects, healthy eating, physical activity, learning new technologies, languages, among others. This has led to a wide range of offerings that respond to multiple needs and interests in a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, from the beginning, these workshops have progressively expanded their influence, reaching more older adults who have consolidated these spaces with their extensive and sustained participation.

An important change that promoted the growth of these pedagogical proposals occurred in the 1970s. It emerged from Positive Psychology, and it questioned the traditional theory of development (Baltes, Lindenberger & Staudinger, 1998). This change was further propelled by multiple research findings that provided evidence of gains and acquisitions in old age.

The introduction of the positive perspective in the field of gerontology brought about theoretical changes regarding the aging process and old age, impacting the development of research from a different perspective and new gerontological practices. The life course theory contrasts with previous models that proposed development occurred in the early stages of life and declined in old age, following an inverted U-shaped pattern.

The Life Course Theory posits that development extends throughout life and exhibits characteristics of multidimensionality, multidirectionality, and great interindividual variability (Baltes, Lindenberger & Staudinger, 1998). Furthermore, instead of focusing solely on biological issues, it includes the importance of cultural aspects and personal life trajectories in understanding this process. From this perspective, research has shown not only the varied resources available to older adults but also their great potential for change and active coping with loss situations. This contrasts with the notion of supposed rigidity during this stage of life, because older adults are shown to be capable of overcoming difficulties. Indeed, among the findings are the possibilities for change and adaptive strategies to generate new behaviors that maintain high levels of well-being and satisfaction.

These findings, in addition to questioning old and false negative stereotypes about old age, contributed to thinking and designing work devices based on the varied possibilities available to older adults. These are aimed at achieving healthy and competent aging, aiming to develop their potential into the most advanced stages of life. Thus, the change in psychological theories about aging allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of this process, expanding possibilities for intervention and contributing to improving the image of old age.

This approach proposed an intervention model, aimed at promoting well-being through work with positive aspects and is presented as complementary to the traditional deficit-focused model. In this regard, the Positive Perspective allowed the design of new practices aimed primarily at fostering positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, enhancing resources and strengths (Seligman, 1998).

Developing such proposals presents a significant challenge for psychology, particularly within the field of gerontology. According to Fernandez Ballesteros (2009), in the short term, it is important to generate devices that allow improving capacities, optimizing and unleashing potentials, and proposing interesting and meaningful activities that motivate learning in older adults.

According to Conde Sala (2007), the tendency towards personal development and self-realization is a natural process, but the social conditions that make it possible and foster it must be present. In this sense, society plays a key role in minimizing differences and creating opportunities that enhance one's skills and aim for competent aging (Fernandez Ballesteros, 2009). It is worth noting that Positive Practices have been widely evaluated, and there is wide evidence of their achievements and beneficial effects.

Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) conducted a meta-analytical study considering 51 studies that assessed the effectiveness of Positive Interventions. These selected investigations included 4266 individuals of different age groups. The results showed that such interventions not only improved well-being but also reduced depressive symptoms. Another relevant finding is that the benefits of Positive Interventions increased with age, and thus older adults were the ones who obtained the best results from them. This finding adds evidence in favor of designing and implementing this type of practice for the elderly.

Currently, there are various devices for older adults — both for promotion and prevention as well as treatment — based on the positive perspective, including educational proposals, which will be addressed next.

## **2. Educational Proposals for the Elderly**

University Programs for Older Adults originated in France in 1973. In Argentina, they began in 1984 at the National University of Entre Ríos; and they were the first Latin American country that developed University Programs for Older Adults (Yuni, 2011). Initially, the offer was narrower and aimed at recreation rather than at learning or development of potentialities.

According to Yuni and Urbano (2015), this experience is deemed foundational. Subsequent university programs followed its guidelines in educational, philosophical, and methodological aspects. In the wake of this, university programs have expanded to different universities throughout the country. Thus, in 2015, 87% of public universities (41 out of a total of 47) offered educational programs for the elderly. These courses are self-financed through economic fees paid by participants.

An important milestone occurred in 2008 when the Argentine National Institute of Social Services for Retirees and Pensioners (PAMI) signed an agreement with the National Interuniversity Council to implement a specific program for the elderly. This comprehensive program, in partnership with public and private universities, created a specific space at universities for the elderly. It is called UPAMI (Integrated Universities for Older Adults) and offers various courses taught at universities. These courses are aimed at members of the Social Security System (PAMI), an organization that serves the majority of older adults in the country.

Universities provide the physical space and human resources for course delivery, while the Social Security System fully finances them. Therefore, these courses are entirely free for older adults.

This proposal has several objectives: to promote personal growth, improve quality of life, ensure equal opportunities for the development of cultural and vocational values, facilitate the acquisition of skills to cope with demands, recover, value, and legitimize personal and social knowledge, promote and stimulate intergenerational dialogue, and foster the social integration and inclusion of the elderly.

From its inception to the present day, this type of proposal has expanded and diversified. Nationally, an increasing number of universities promote academic, recreational, and cultural activities for older adults. Specifically, in the city of Mar del Plata, various workshops are implemented by public entities in agreement with different universities. These include the PUAM (University Program for Older Adults), under the Extension Secretariat of the National University of Mar del Plata; U-PAMI (Agreement between PAMI and Faculties of the National University of Mar del Plata, and between PAMI and the Universidad Atlántida Argentina); the Municipality of General Pueyrredón (workshops under the Third Age Secretariat); and Art Workshops for Older Adults (under the National Directorate of Policies for Older Adults). These instances of non-formal education are inclusive and socializing, with a minimum age as the only requirement.

They are conceived as a specific type of positive intervention because the benefits they provide to participants result in improvements in psychological, social, and physical areas. They are socio-educational workshops that promote bidirectional knowledge exchange between the workshop facilitator as a teacher and the participants. While the current wide range of workshops is heterogeneous, catering to the diverse interests of older adults, they all revolve around a specific theme and promote peer socialization, prioritizing the learning of attitudes, values, skills, behaviors, and relevant abilities for the psychosocial development of individuals (Dottori, 2015) (see Figures 1–4).



**Figure 1 Folklore Workshop**



**Figure 2 Painting Workshop**



**Figure 3 Reflection Workshop**



**Figure 4 Digital Photography Workshop**

These workshops are based on two pillars: active life and lifelong learning (Herrera, 2003; Villar & Celdrán, 2012). According to Villar and Solé (2007), they can be classified into two types: the first one is oriented toward training to compensate for aging-related losses, and the second is aimed at growth and the development of competencies. These competencies involve not only compensating for or preventing possible losses but also improving personal and social functioning.

Within the first group are those aimed at compensating for biological, psychological, or social losses. These workshops aim to provide resources and/or skills that allow the person to continue functioning in their life course. An example is Cognitive Stimulation Workshops, which develop exercises to optimize cognitive and intellectual functions, as well as pre-retirement workshops aimed at preventing or compensating for the effects of retirement.

In the second group, there are workshops aimed at acquiring new knowledge, disciplinary, technological, movement-based, as well as personal development. Villar and Solé (2007) argue that both objectives, compensation and growth, are not incompatible but can be present, jointly, in the majority of educational

workshops.

Currently, the most popular topics among older adults are technological updating, followed by cognitive stimulation, movement, and languages. According to Bermejo García (2010), socio-educational activities with older adults constitute processes of great richness, diversity, complexity, and openness. This implies that professionals in charge of them must have a wide range of resources, including not only substantive knowledge but also technical and methodological.

In this sense, Villalobos and Riveros (2018) point out three premises about adult learning that must be considered when designing and implementing an educational workshop for the elderly. These premises are: 1) they learn differently from children, so teaching techniques must also be different; 2) they value meaningful learning based on their own experience, which helps them find practical solutions to their most pressing problems and needs; and 3) The relationship between the facilitators and the participating group is more egalitarian, diminishing the notion of superior expertise and a power dynamic based on ownership and access to such knowledge. In addition to specific subject matter, didactic tools, evaluation instruments, and gerontological knowledge are required. Therefore, the training of those who work as teachers in these types of proposals for older adults constitutes an ongoing challenge (Lirio, 2015) that will contribute to their advancement and improvement.

### **3. What Are the Benefits of Participating in These Workshops?**

Participation in educational workshops brings various benefits to older adults. Education enables the transformation capacity of the individual (Yuni & Urbano, 2010), and the activities promote adaptation, social inclusion, and personal development. A particularly highlighted aspect of the life course perspective is the role of human adaptability. Plasticity is the adjustment mechanism that allows adaptation to new contexts, while some aspects are abandoned, others are maintained, and new ones emerge (Iacub, 2015).

Workshops for seniors provide resources, knowledge, and skills that allow for an active process where the individual is capable of achieving better adaptation to the changes that aging entails and even modifying their life circumstances.

Likewise, these devices constitute inclusive proposals. Fassio (2015) argues that many older adults have not had opportunities to be educated in their childhood and youth mainly due to the lack of educational offerings. Educational inclusion represents an opportunity to repair the social inequalities that occurred in previous stages of life (Yuni, Urbano & Tarditi, 2012), and contributes to the integral development of the individual by promoting learning and participation. Therefore, the role of the State in promoting these spaces through educational proposals from universities and public organizations is fundamental (Dottori & Soliverez, 2013).

Educational activities constitute a strategy for the re-elaboration of identity (Yuni, 2005). The aging process generates social, psychological, and physical changes that can produce discrepancies in the individual's identity. Participation in psychoeducational workshops can provide seniors with new ways of understanding themselves, promoting coherence and continuity in their lives, and offering resources to guide their actions (Iacub, 2015). In these cases, narration and storytelling are tools that allow giving meaning to experience, provide security, and fundamentally promote re-signification and self-projection.

Furthermore, workshops also allow for reconfiguring the social support network. This plays a central role during old age. Participation in these devices allows for interaction with others, meeting new people, and establishing new relationships (Dottori & Soliverez, 2023); they promote the development of bonds with peers

and encourage participation in new social contexts. The initiation of new activities has been identified as the main facilitator for the incorporation of new bonds in old age (Arias, Favro, Sabatini & Casasola, 2023).

Numerous studies suggest that participation in workshops of this nature yields multifaceted benefits for older adults. These include heightened perceptions of social integration (Montoro & Pinazzo, 2005), enhanced personal development, increased self-satisfaction, greater enjoyment of life, and a heightened sense of usefulness (Villar, 2010). Additionally, such participation has been linked to improvements in emotional and physical well-being (Calzado Almodóvar et al., 2013), a more positive self-perception of aging and emotional equilibrium (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013), enhanced communication skills, and better interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, individuals often experience advancements in emotional, physical, and cognitive abilities (Ortiz-Colón, 2015), alongside an overall enhancement in health status (Maffeo, 2023).

At the national level, the results also indicate an improvement in the social and psychological areas of personal development (CEPRAM 2013; Dottori, Arias & Soliveréz, 2015; Lagarrigue et. al., 2013; Yuni, Urbano & Tarditi, 2012). Finally, participation in socioeducational activities is also considered a form of social inclusion that promotes empowerment and generativity (Dottori & Soliveréz, 2013).

Specifically, in the city of Mar del Plata, Argentina, researchers looked into the benefits older adults gain from joining educational workshops. The sample consisted of 120 older adults aged 60 or older who had participated or were participating in Workshops for Older Adults in said city. They were administered a closed-question questionnaire consisting of 77 items that explored the impact of workshop participation on the psychological, physical, and social areas (Dottori, Arias & Soliveréz, 2015). All items had three response options that allowed the comparison of the situation after participating in the workshops with the previous one. The person could respond if their situation in the different aspects evaluated had improved, remained the same, or worsened. The results showed that all the people who were part of the sample reported positive changes from their participation in the workshops. The area that presented the greatest benefits was social, highlighting the increase in their participation in proposals for older adults, as well as the interest in getting involved in new activities. They also expressed that participating in the workshops had increased encounters with friends. It was followed by a psychological area that showed various positive aspects such as improvements at the intellectual level, mood, greater enthusiasm, general well-being, and joy. In all the aforementioned indicators of both social and psychological areas, more than half of the older adults reported improvements. Regarding the physical area, approximately 40% of the sample reported experiencing positive changes mainly in terms of a better self-perception of health and a decrease in the frequency of bodily pains (Dottori, Arias & Soliveréz, 2015).

Similar results have been found in research conducted in other countries. In general, it is clear that the positive impact of this type of activity goes beyond the specific knowledge addressed and constitutes in itself a space for enjoyment. The study conducted by Pérez-Albéniz, Pascual, Cruz Navarro, and Lucas-Molina (2015) provided evidence about the advantages of lifelong education and the importance of physical and mental activity in the quality of life of older adults.

In their study, Villar, Pinazo, Triado, Celdrán, and Solé (2010) discovered that attending university programs for older adults resulted in two significant outcomes: satisfaction and enjoyment, followed by an enhanced sense of usefulness. In general, the enjoyment derived from learning and the search for knowledge for its own sake are key aspects for older adult students (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Additionally, other benefits have been reported such as the expansion of social networks, obtaining more social support programs (Montoro, Pinazo, & Tortosa, 2007; Villar, 2003), and improvement in cognitive functioning (Cambero Rivero & Diaz Galván, 2019).

These findings are consistent with each other and demonstrate that participation in this type of educational proposal provides older adults with multiple benefits that go beyond the specific knowledge that can be acquired. Development occurs in various areas, generating a positive impact on the overall well-being of the elderly.

#### 4. Conclusions

The importance of education in the individual's life is concluded, as a resource for training, inclusion, transformation, and personal development. Education is seen as an opportunity to foster situations and processes that involve the application of knowledge and skills, facilitating new social interactions and providing valuable tools for tackling present-day challenges. National and international research has demonstrated the benefits that participation in educational activities provides to older adults.

Workshops for older adults enable experiential and shared learning that has a high impact on quality of life. These are spaces for encounter and enjoyment, where there is exchange and reconstruction of knowledge that promotes individual and social development. In this way, education allows for opening new possibilities for finding new meanings in this vital stage. Older adults show great interest and actively engage, enjoying the experience, in encounters of great exchange and participation. The coordinators of these initiatives must establish conditions conducive to managing and organizing participatory strategies. They must understand that older adults' motivation extends beyond acquiring new knowledge; it includes the desire to engage with peers in spaces that foster recognition, thus influencing their subjective positioning.

Therefore, we conceive workshops for older adults as a positive practice that promotes their well-being, being an important tool for empowerment and the exercise of their rights. In this sense, the design of innovative proposals that provide older adults with spaces for learning and central participation is more than relevant in today's society. The conception and implementation of these workshops from a positive, interdisciplinary perspective, and a rights-based approach strengthens the proposal.

The offer of recommendations of this type provides older adults with more opportunities for participation, integration, and full development of the potential they possess, and also contributes to the generation of more favorable environments. The rise of gerontological practices not only enhances social conditions but also fosters changes at both group and individual levels. These changes contribute to the development of new personal resources, enabling older adults to make decisions and choices with less influence from negative stereotypes. This empowerment of older adults has been highlighted in studies such as that by Iacub & Arias (2011).

Therefore, it is considered that these spaces constitute an opportunity for personal development, a valuable resource to promote autonomy, and subjective well-being, and optimize the quality of life in all individuals. Additionally, these spaces guarantee a better aging process in older adults.

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