

# SENIORS' CLUB – LEARNING AND BLOGGING TOGETHER

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## ABSTRACT

Seniors' Club – a technology club for older people – has now been functioning for about one and a half year at the University of Joensuu. In the club senior citizens collaboratively learn to use different ICT technologies and at the same time the club provides participating researchers and academic tutors new insights and information in the areas of old age usability and learning. At Seniors' Club "Life stories" have been acting as an underlying topic for different small-scale projects that seniors have engaged in. We have found out that this theme has been a great motivational factor for the elders. In this community of practice the scaffolding has been twofold: as human scaffolding we use researchers and students, whereas technical scaffolding consists of a set of ICTs (hardware, software and WWW). In this article we will focus on the blog usage in the Seniors' Club. The out-of-the-club participation takes place in the Internet, where we have got a shared blog-area (WordPress). Results have been gained by using action research and by a small www-questionnaire that was devised after the first year of the club's existence. In addition, this paper describes some new activities taking place at the club and the paper also discusses what kind of platforms would be most suitable for the older people, and presents the question why such platforms do not exist. During the ongoing semester we have also tested some Workshop activities. These will be also described shortly.

## KEYWORDS

Older people and ICT, socio-technical capital, blogging, senior citizens, collaborative learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The population of Europe is aging rapidly. According to EuroStat (2006) the population aged 65 and over is estimated to grow from 17 % to 30 % of the total population by the year 2050. At the same time municipalities and states are seeking new and more productive service models, which rely heavily on modern technologies. For example in Finnish context, in the area of gerontechnology, there are over 100 projects going on researching and developing methods to support independent living, and information and communication technology usage and health related issues via various technologies among the older people (Naumanen, 2006). The role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is pervasive but it is not clear yet how older people themselves should be taken into this framework. In most of these ongoing projects older people are considered as objects of the study.

Our research takes as a starting point the idea that the older people has to be taken as active co-developers of the ICTs created for them. In this paper the older people are also called as seniors, senior citizens – even elderly, all, however referring to a person being at his or her third age (Laslett, 1991), i.e. still being an active and independent actor of the society and having the control of his or her own life and future plans.

Many senior citizens are just entering to the new territory of ICT and thus, they need to get to know the jargon (at some level) and the basic ideas beyond. As Tedre et al. (2006) have put it, computational artefacts in the light of socio-constructivism and theories are social products and mainly produced by the class in

power (the mainstream). It is not difficult, then, to note that older people are put aside and their voice has disappeared in the fringe areas. We, in our club, also want to get older people to know new technologies, their impacts and potentials – from their perspective on. Modern day Web affords various ways to participate, but what are the unique cultural contexts via which older people could create their own uses and meanings for that? One way of looking at the things is to take social and cultural issues into the account (Ito et. al, 2001; Tedre et al., 2006). It is not pure information and technology people are looking for, but the usage of it as a means to achieve some inner motives like communication with relatives and peers.

There has also been debate whether computer and web usage really increases well-being of older people. Dickinson and Gregor (2006) made a content analysis of some publications and found out that it is the mediating role of computers, the sociability and hands on approach taken among the elderly instead of the plain technique, that mattered. This cooperative, tool-mediated, community of practice approach is also put into the use in our Seniors' Club. Like in Resnick's (2001) sociotechnical capital, the productive mixes of social relations/activity and ICTs makes it flourish. In real life it could mean more communication between generations, new interests to engage in web-based discussions (with increased trust) or just being part of the group or society.

Seniors' Club (SC) – at the department of Computers Science and Statistics in the University of Joensuu – has now turned into its second operational semester. It is a technology club for older people aged 60-75 years old, as well as a living research environment for the researchers in educational technology and human-computer interaction (HCI). This reciprocity is one of the special features that differs the club from the other similar types of activities (Eronen et al, 2006). Seniors are making their own and joint projects with help of modern technology and at the same time giving us valuable information about their learning and the usability issues. Out of the class activities are performed at home settings (writing, taking digital photos, etc.) and the club has shared – members only – blog-area for conveying messages, upcoming events and sharing information about software, meetings, etc.

In this paper we will have a look at the club's activities this autumn and discuss about blogging and Internet usage among older people of the Seniors' Club. After the first year of club's existence we devised a small www-based questionnaire, which was returned by 12 seniors. We will present some results of the questionnaire in this paper.

## **2. SENIORS' CLUB: ACTIVITIES AND LIFE ONLINE**

In this section we shall describe the activities that have taken place in SC this term and what we have planned to come. We collected some evaluation data after the first semester of SC. Some modifications were then made into the working concept based on the results received (incl. working methods, topics to be discussed and the blog area).

### **2.1 Activities in Seniors' Club**

During the first year the members worked with their projects under the term “Life stories” and got to know general topics of ICT at the theoretical level (digital-TV, buying a computer, digital photography, Internet, etc.). Digital-TV is a current topic in Finland because the analog transmission will end in the August 2007. SC is equipped with PC-laptops, mostly shared by 2-3 seniors. The computers are running Windows XP (at first the OS was an English version, from the beginning of this fall in Finnish) and mixed set of software, most of which – unfortunately – are only in English. The language of the applications plays a key role in the learning of seniors, as it poses one extra cognitive obstacle for them. In the discussions with the seniors, it has come out that seniors want to know what e.g. a command word or menu choice is their mother's tongue. The concept of learning what the command does in the application and relate that to the command is not preferred by the seniors because it gives them two different learning objects: the word in English and the action of the command. For this reason we have tried to acquire Finnish versions of the software to be used in SC.

The projects the seniors have been working are centered around the concept “Life stories”. Projects include e.g. making a digital photography and video guide for seniors (to share and publish their life stories), documents about their working life, their hobbies or life “in old times”. There is also one multi-media story-

book (in cd-rom) to come before Christmas 2006 (the contents is author's old school essays read and written and made navigable).

The second year of SC we continued working with the same seniors we had the last year (12 participants out of the original 21). The meetings are held weekly and each week we have a certain main topic under which the activities take place. The activities themselves, however, are not fixed to the topic – we want to hear seniors' wishes and take them into account. What was new – also – this fall, was the 6 week long workshop held. It is described subsequently.

### **2.1.1 Game Workshop**

One PhD student of our department is researching digital games and connected to that she designed a Workshop in which seniors (and kids, separately) will create a game, based on photographs in different cultural contexts (in Finland, Germany and Mexico) using computers as tools. As a starting point, we showed our seniors a Mexican lottery to modify. The topic itself was to design a game that shows the city of Joensuu in some context (architectural, folklore, history, etc.). We had 3 groups that made 3 different games (Joensuu-code, Joensuu architecture lottery and one domino-like game with poems), which all were tested and played at the end of the Workshop. What they learned was the usage of scanners and memory-sticks, some Photoshop and working with files and folders in large quantities. The groups were doing well and most of the times they worked very independently. Each session started with a small introductory “what we will do today” and then went on freely. The sessions were videotaped and some comments were asked after each session. The comments posted to SC's blog were overtly positive: working together and doing something concrete was appreciated. Nearly all participants also worked during their own time.

### **2.1.2 Digital-TV Controlled by Physical or Virtual Remote Control**

From the research point of view, the seniors have participated in some empirical research projects involving eye-tracking methods. Next upcoming project will take place in November 2006. It will be a small-scale empirical study (part of one Master's thesis), which compares the usability of two different input mechanisms for interactive digital-TV: one by physical remote control and another by gaze controlled virtual control. As an application we will be using a small interactive digital-TV quiz. Seniors will get short training before the actual testing. Even though the sample size will be small (being 2 females and 2 males), the test may contribute some new findings about the eye-tracking and older people. In previous – also eye-tracking related – research, some suggestions for improvement about the usability of one governmental web-site were constructed (Mustonen, 2006).

## **2.2 Internet and Blog Usage**

The Internet and blog usage data from SC was collected by a WWW-form, a link to which was sent to each member of the club at the end of the last season 2006 (or participants could answer by the snail-mail version). Questionnaire was divided into 7 parts, one of them concerning the blog (system) and computer usage (incl. Internet). People aged over 65 tend to have long intervals in the usage of Internet in Finland. Still, the amount of users (relatively) has grown mostly among those over 60 years old. In the latest statistics, about 26% of people aged 60-74 had used Internet during the past 3 months (Statistics Finland, 2006). According to the international recommendation, weekly Internet use is defined as regular use. Based on that, our seniors (at least those who answered the questionnaire) can be considered regular users of the Internet, because many of them (7/12) used the web several times a week. Internet was mostly used for e-mailing, net banking and information search. In addition, newspapers were also read online.

Seniors were also asked for the good sides, the problems, the things to be improved and the frequency of usage of the blog. The answers were diverse, but based on those the blog structure was revised. The good points noted were e.g. quick and up-to-date way of delivering information, easy to use and nice to read greetings. About ¼ did not say anything to this question. Problems encountered were e.g. difficulty in usage or exiguous usage. Some mentioned that there were all too much unnecessary information available and that the view was too small-scale. There were also some log-in problems confronted. Some seniors would also have wanted to include pictures in the blog-area. It was not possible in the version we used last year and at the on-going year it seems not to be favored (due to the complexity of the task). What our seniors suggested for improvements were e.g. topics should be more visible, more personal guiding to its usage and easier

access to the materials (e.g. for working together with the group). About ¼ did not have any suggestion. It was also mentioned that the purpose of the blog should be made clear. Seniors did read the blog frequently but they did not contribute so much to the content itself, or lead any longer chains of conversations. Few used the comments option. About 46 % of the posts sent (according to the blog statistics, October 28<sup>th</sup>) were posted by administrator, and most active seniors (those posted 5 or more posts) accounted for 20 % of the messages sent. In case of the comments, the numbers were 35 and 65 respectively, those commenting being mostly the most active posters, as well.

As a platform we use WordPress (WordPress, 2006). There are 16 topics (e.g. Members, HTML & Internet, Software and usage, Digital Photography, Small & Fun, Projects, Files & Folders). “Greetings” functions as a default topic and without some exceptions, all the posts are put under that category. Admin moves them every now and then under their “right ones”. See the general view of the blog in the Figure 1.

Whether it is inadequate training or the complexity of the platform that restricts the more active participation of the seniors is yet to be resolved. Though as the club itself now runs weekly, they might prefer the collaborative activities taken at the computer, not the mediated and colder discussions via the blog. When asked about the online communication, it was mainly (7/12) regarded as a positive issue. Few (3/12) considered it to be more superficial and needing typing skills (2/12). Next year, we may move from using blog to a more structured virtual learning environment Moodle, and test whether it is more suitable, comfortable and easier to use and understand for the seniors.



Figure 1. Glimpse on the blog used in Seniors' Club

### 3. CONCLUSION

To make a web-based activities and modern technology more familiar to senior citizens can be approached in many ways. However, it is important to involve the seniors to distinguish what type of activities they like and feel most effective and enjoyable. In Seniors' club, we emphasize the social context, the life experiences and actual doing of tasks, and use technology (computers, software and other equipments) as tools to achieve the goals. As a starting point we have used Life stories as a motivating means to seniors to learn the different

ICTs. As an example of ICTs we have used blogging as an out-of-the-class communication means. By far no appropriate www-based platform has been found, but WordPress functions as a proxy: it mediates the information and materials, and works as a repository for them. However, what could make seniors more interested and active in using it as posters, as well, remains open. New forms of activities taken this year got a good feedback and a good group spirit among the members will later form a solid foundation for functioning group – also online. What else could be noted – citing one of our senior – is the “.. we are no longer the slaves of machines but the machines are now our servants. If only one could command them [better].”, which forms a good starting point for the conquest of the digi-world – despite the age.

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