

Building on European experience: the ForAge Project and the construction of knowledge of later-life learning

Professor Keith Percy (Lancaster University), Dr. Jonathan Hughes (The Open University) and Dr. Anne Jamieson (Birkbeck College, University of London)

1.

The ‘Forage for Later-life Learning: Building on European Experience Project’ is a multi-lateral network, funded by the European Union Grundtvig Programme for three years (January 2012 – December 2014). There are 16 network partners (including the Association for Education and Ageing, of which the authors of this paper are members) in 14 countries, with Leicester University as lead partner. At the time of writing there are only a few months of the Project’s funded life remaining.

The rationale of the ForAge Project is the construction of knowledge about later-life learning, in the form of a database, and the use of that database as a means of promoting discussion, understanding, recognition and change – change in both policy and practice in later-life learning. This paper outlines and examines how that that rationale has been realised.

The formal aims of the ForAge Project were ambitious In its Project ‘Handbook’ of 2012 (which is based closely on the original Project application to Brussels approved in 2011) strong and resonant statements are made. The ForAge Project has:

the central aim of communicating and promoting experiences of learning for older people. The goal is to ... be the initial source of information for later-life learning activities in Europe ... [and to] help raise standards of practice throughout Europe and beyond (Handbook, pp.1, 9).

The rationale given in the Handbook for the existence of the Project consists of three connected observations and aspirations that:

- In Europe, in the last twenty years, “there have been many exchanges, projects, training events, seminars, programmes and networks concerned with learning in later life”;
- So “ these rich experiences (*sic*)” should be built upon “by sharing information, creating networks, relating them to research evidence and analysing and assessing their value and impact”;
- The ultimate aim is to “thereby promote an integrated and coherent approach in future policy and practice” (Handbook p.1.)

It is an attractive rationale, although based on an optimistic view of past experience in later-life learning and a rational and ambitious approach to how future policy and practice could be developed. It is understandable that it attracted European Commission funding and a project partnership of 16 organisations.

Indeed, the ForAge Handbook goes on to detail and expand the Project rationale. The Project, it says will fill a gap and provide services not provided elsewhere in the later-life learning field. It will “connect later-life learning ideas, projects, policy, research and voices of older people”. In sum, it will be the “missing link”. ForAge:

aspires to be the ‘network of networks’ in the field of later-life learning ... [which will] build bridges between the practices and link them to research and policy developments in this field. No other sources currently exist that can offer information, advice, analyses, discussion [platforms]... policy recommendations or current and future developments in this field. Our network will provide this missing link (Handbook, pp. 2, 5).

A key argument deployed to support this passage is that there has been a multitude of European (particularly Grundtvig) projects and partnerships concerned with later-life learning in recent years but that the full benefit of their outcomes will not be seen until the connections between them have been made and analysed properly.

So what would the ForAge Project actually do? The Handbook of the ForAge Project says that “in order to achieve its aims and objectives” the Project will:

- *create an interactive website for each EU country to feed data about later-life learning - practice, policy, research, success and failure - into an ongoing, sustainable, interactive and accessible database for wider use. Our target will be evidence of a well-used data base and website.*
- *promote the use of the stored data for research, analysis, sectoral searching, project building and partner searching.*
- *document, evaluate and analyse projects at a European level and promote new ways to utilise their results whether in a new context or for a new organisation.*
- *provide regular information on new policy directions (European, national and sub-national where relevant)*
- *provide a source of advice and information to emerging and current EU programmes*
- *push the later-life learning agenda further, rather than solely collating best practice.* (Handbook, 9)

It is clear, then, that the development of a database, housed in the interactive website, was central to the whole enterprise from the very beginning. Data and information on later-life learning, once gathered together and appropriately structured, would be the engine to drive the delivery of all the other intended actions and services in the field of later-life learning. The database would be a foundation, a platform, a source of evidence and an armoury. With it, ForAge would “frame and stimulate debates across bureaucracies, disciplines and silos [*sic*]”, “develop dialogue with key national and European politicians and decision makers concerning emerging and key themes and issues in later-life learning and “be an agency where debate stimulates change”. (Handbook, 5).

2.

At the first meeting of the international group of ForAge partners in Leicester in February 2012, the website and database were major topics for discussion. During the meeting, a sub-group drew up an outline specification, noting as it did that:

there are a number of different kinds of database:

- *a 'stabilised' database that requires more work but is more sustainable.*
- *A Google type database using a key words search mechanism.*
- *The ADAM and EVE database model that offers discretionary searches based on articles.*

The sub-group's specification, which was agreed by the partners as a whole, recorded that, *inter alia*:

The scope of the content of the database ... [should be] later-life learning and disciplines that intersect with later-life learning; health, economics, social justice and integration, equality, inter-generational issues, areas of culture, heritage and artistic expression, employment and technology with education and training.

The specification stated that the database main menu divisions could be "Research; Policy; Practice; Projects" and that data included

would optimally include Project reports; books; published and unpublished articles and papers; and occasionally magazine and newspaper articles and even press releases according to significance

After the Leicester international meeting, there followed a period of months in which the technical construction of a website with integrated data base was undertaken by one of the ForAge partners in line with guidance given by the lead partner and the specifications agreed at the international meeting (<http://www.foragenetwork.eu/en/>). There was little further discussion in this period of how the headline proposals of "Research; Policy; Practice; Projects" should be refined and detailed. Indeed, there was uncertainty about which of the partners should lead on these actions and seek to stimulate and guide the other partners in identifying and providing the content of the database.

Eventually, it was agreed in the autumn of 2012 that the AEA (Association for Education and Ageing) would take on the role. AEA concluded immediately that it did not have an open brief. There were already parameters for the construction of the database: the Project proposal documents and the Handbook; the specification of February 2012; and the technical capacities of the now functioning website and database.

The first task was to establish a framework, essentially a framework of categories, for the organisation of material to be placed into the database. The headline categories of "Research; Policy; Practice; Projects" would not be enough. On what premises and principles

should the framework be based? The first one seemed obvious. The database had to give target audiences for the database what they needed and what they wanted. But which were the target audiences?

Fortunately, the ForAge proposal documentation contained a list. The Project's target audiences were to be:

- *Policy-makers and other decision-makers at national and regional governmental levels*
- *Organisations, education providers, teachers and trainers working within the field of later-life learning or seeking to do so*
- *Agencies involved in promoting a better quality of life for older people through social inclusion, active and healthy ageing, volunteering and intergenerational engagement*
- *Older learners*
- *Scientific research communities seeking to undertake research informed by us and others* (Handbook, p.12).

It was a comprehensive, all-embracing list of different audiences. Presumably, these target groups would be united in expecting that the database gave them access to current knowledge about later life learning in Europe but it was unlikely that they would be looking for the same kinds of knowledge.

At this point there was debate among the relevant members of AEA. Could there really be different 'kinds' of knowledge? A strong case was made for the boundaries of 'knowledge' to be drawn tightly and confined to what is 'known' - scientifically known, backed up by methodological rigour and empirical evidence. That, it was urged, would have real use. It would provide the baseline and direction for new research activity; it would meet the needs of policy-makers and politicians for facts and evidence; it would enable students to scan a field of study with relative ease; it would enable practitioners to compare their practical observations and experience with research findings; and it would make it easier for older people to check wild and over-dramatic media headlines about the latest research on older people and cognitive activity.

The contrary argument was that not all of the target audiences wanted to, would have time to, would feel comfortable with reading empirical research papers, academic literature reviews and theoretical analyses. The ForAge Handbook stated that the Project was concerned not only to disseminate evidence-based knowledge but also to make available information, opinion, discussion, recommendations and 'voices'. It was this argument which carried the day. The decision was that there should be a width of material in the database and its organisation should be such that the different audiences could find the type of material for which they were looking without confusion and without mistaking it for something which it was not.

It was also pointed out that, in the basic premise that the target audiences would expect that the database gave them "access to current knowledge about later life learning in

Europe”, ‘knowledge’ was not the only possibly contentious term. What was to be the operational definition of such the terms as ‘later-life’, ‘learning’, ‘Europe’ and, even, ‘current’. It quickly made sense to take two terms as, in effect, already stipulated in Project documents – ‘later-life’ as ‘aged 50 years or more’ and Europe to mean ‘all Europe when possible’ but, if not, the ‘14 partner countries’. Further, what was to be counted as ‘current’ could be a matter for pragmatic and common-sense decision (e.g. normally, ‘made available in the last three years’ but subject to variation according to the type of data).

There was the prospect at this stage of a prolonged, possibly inconclusive, quasi-philosophical debate on the meaning of ‘learning’. But the more pragmatic and easier solution was adopted of taking an inclusive definition of ‘learning’ which, umbrella-like, covered such concepts as ‘learning activity’, ‘education’ ‘teaching’ and ‘training’ as well as the many varieties of formal, non-formal and informal learning, however defined.

3.

The next step was to see what had been done before and to learn from it. It was desirable to find and examine other databases, portals and classifications of material in later-life learning or in overlapping or adjacent fields of study such as ageing in general, adult education and lifelong learning. The sources were mainly on-line but occasionally book-based. The search which was undertaken was, to some extent, serendipitous: it was largely a question of using online search engines to see what was already in place. It was not always possible to identify the rationales behind the taxonomies and classifications consulted.

After some weeks, AEA had collected a range of approaches, examples and frameworks. Some were actual databases; others were no more than relevant books. The interest lay in the ways in which the content was divided and headlined. Using a terminology and classification developed for this one-off task, the frameworks appeared to fall into one of seven categories reproduced below.

FUNCTIONAL

Related to professional practice; showing how things are done, how things should be done;

e.g. Age of Creativity database : online platform which aims to foster collaboration and discussion between practitioners, facilitators, artists and organisations in the field of arts and older people <http://www.ageofcreativity.co.uk/resources>

ACADEMIC/RESEARCH

Containing research, theory, research methods, research funding, data, evidence, reviews, reports, conclusions, dissemination;

e.g. New Database of Ageing Research(NDAR): Database on research projects classifying all aspects of research process & environment http://www.cpa.org.uk/research/ndar_about.html

POLICY

Concerned with summarising policies and the development of policy; including discussions of how policy might change;

e.g. McMaster Optimal Aging Portal: provides summaries of scientific evidence about healthy ageing directed to different audiences including clinical, public health and policy professionals <http://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/>

Social Care Online: UK's largest online database of information on all aspects of social work and social care <http://www.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk/>

PROMOTIONAL

Promoting programmes, perspectives and solutions including later-life learning

e.g. AgeingWell Network portal: promotes the market uptake of ICT solutions for Ageing Well <http://89.152.245.33/dotnetnuke/ageingwell/Home.aspx>

Healthy and Active Ageing (EuroHealth): promotes the well-being of “younger” older people <http://www.healthyageing.eu/sites/www.healthyageing.eu/files/resources/Healthy%20and%20Active%20Ageing.pdf>

COMPREHENSIVE

Attempting comprehensive (unclassified) coverage of field or topic

e.g. DIE (Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung): online library catalogue covering world literature on adult learning . <http://bibliothek.die-bonn.de/webopac/index.asp>

SPECIFIC

Accessing the details of projects, programmes and activities which have been supported by a particular organisation, programme or scheme

e.g. ADAM: contains extended details of EU Leonardo da Vinci projects in initial and further vocational education and training. www.adam-europe.eu/

EST (European Shared Treasure): contains details of participating organisations, aims, targets and products of EU Comenius, Leonardo and Grundtvig projects <http://www.europeansharedtreasure.eu/>

NDA (New Dynamics of Ageing Programme): contains details of multidisciplinary, multi-project research initiative on improvement of quality of life of older people <http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/about-the-programme.html>

MAPPING

Proposing, mapping and defining a field of study and learning.

e.g. ALADIN (Adult Learning Documentation and Information Network): information broker between researchers, practitioners and policy makers in the area of adult learning and literacy. <http://www.unesco.org/education/aladin/>

Findsen, B. and Formosa, M. (2011) A “handbook...[on] the phenomenon of older adult learning, one which “ maps the territory in light of the emergent learning theories, research and policies” (p.2)

It was fairly easy to conclude that the framework for the ForAge database would not be described completely by any of these categories but required elements of several. This was because it had to relate to the purposes of the ForAge project and the purposes which the database had to play in supporting ForAge activity. Moreover, the AEA personnel involved believed that the database was also a special opportunity. It was an opportunity to present international material about later-life learning – some of it not well- known - alongside material related to it within a logical structure.

In terms of frameworks, then, the outcome was complex. In terms of the above categories, the ForAge data base was to be conceived of as partly Functional, partly Academic, partly Policy and partly Mapping. There was a discussion about whether it should also be Promotional in line with the committed values of the ForAge Project but the notion seemed to fit better with the broader content of the Project website

The complexity of the database led to two other conclusions, that: i) a structure of categories and sub-categories would be required to keep different kinds of ‘knowledge’ distinct and ii) it might be possible for the structure to evolve as the nature of the material available became evident and attempts to classify and relate it were made.

4.

After some months, it became clear that the perspective of the database as a developing and evolving body of knowledge was the correct one. The early discussions, mediated by the early possible material for inclusion, led to the database being grouped under seven headline categories :

Policy

Research

Theory/Practice

Commentary

Newsletters

EU projects

Other Resources

At first sight it was an uneven list. ‘Policy’, ‘Research’ and ‘Theory/Practice’ implied one level of discourse – focused, academic, analytic, critical – and ‘Newsletters’, ‘EU projects’ and ‘Other Resources’ another – descriptive, informative, practical even serendipitous. Between them flowed the broad unclassified river of ‘Commentary’. In truth the list was more pragmatic than originally anticipated. On the one hand there had been the intention of restricting the number of Headline categories; on the other hand were the triple intentions of i) relating to the range of ForAge activities and purposes; ii) not confusing fact with opinion or evidence with anecdote and iii) finding a home for all material of interest. The category ‘Theory/Practice’ was adopted tentatively – the aim was to capture the material in the fields of ‘theory and objectives of practice’ as well as in ‘practice’ itself, and in the frontier territory between them, while stepping around the ‘Research’ category and its symbiotic relationship with theory. ‘Commentary’ was originally labelled ‘Opinion’ and was an attempt to distinguish between opinion-based and research-based discussion. However, the label had changed to accommodate the widening scope of the material and the purposive nature of some of it. Finally, the anonymous-sounding category ‘Other Resources’ had earlier labels which were equally uncommunicative. The category began as a temporary home for material that did not seem to belong elsewhere or was difficult to classify. It did, however, evolve over time and build its own identity.

This seven-sided database began with few sub-categories and the intent to develop them as they became logically necessary. They soon did. If one takes the category of ‘Research’, for example, it developed over time the sub-categories of ‘Quantitative’, ‘Qualitative’, ‘Evaluation’, ‘Statistical Surveys’, ‘Reviews’. The category of ‘Other Resources’ came to shape itself with the sub-categories of ‘Databases’, ‘Portals’, ‘Networks’, ‘Organisations’, ‘Research Centres’ and ‘Research Programmes’.

At the time of writing the database is growing steadily and will continue to grow as resources allow. With more time, person-hours, and sources of material it could grow faster. But where has the material come from? The key idea was that the material would be submitted /suggested by the partners in 14 countries. This has happened, but not consistently. The ForAge partnership is a varied partnership of different kinds of organisations drawn to the partnership for their different skill-sets. Not all had the same degree of experience, background or familiarity with the sorts of material that could feed into the ForAge database. Moreover, the Project drew on the resource of hours paid for in the partnership by the Forage grant and this resource reduced as the Project passed through its second and into its final year. This resulted in a greater dependence on AEA personnel to maintain a flow of material into the database.

What are the criteria for inclusion of material? They were laid down in the Forage international meeting of February 2012 in Leicester – “relevance, quality and usefulness” to

the field of later-life learning. An important decision made at that meeting was that the material should go through a process of quality control, necessarily one dependent upon human judgement. As the patterns of responsibility evolved, this came to mean that all material was scrutinised by one of the AEA personnel who sought to apply the standards of “relevance, quality and usefulness” fairly, logically and consistently, drawing upon their own knowledge of the field.

At an early point, an important issue of principle was decided. Although English was the language used in the ForAge project, and hence in the website and database, non - English language material would be included in the database. It was obvious that there would be material of value in many other European languages in most, probably all of the database categories and sub -categories. Therefore, it was important to make it known, and potentially available, through the database. Of course this both increased the volume and extended the nature of the workload of those responsible for the database. There were no resources to translate such material into English but at least a reference and a link to the material could be made available and, if possible, the original material uploaded to the database. The aim was to provide an abstract in both the original language and in English. Thereafter, the responsibility would lie with the reader to pursue the material in whatever way s/he wished. The issue of quality control remained. If non - English language material came from a partner a discussion could take place; if not, AEA personnel had to use their accumulating experience of quality indicators. If a non - English partner provided material, it was agreed that AEA would edit as appropriate any abstract written in English.

There is a significant amount of untranslated non - English language material in the ForAge database now. The scope of the database has spread to include some material in European languages other than those represented in the partnership. This expansion remains underway. We believe that the accumulation of such material, if sufficient, will provide a useful opportunity for considering not only the material itself but also the approaches which different countries take to later-life learning, to the questions which it raises and how scholars and commentators Europe-wide attempt to answer them.

Experience has latterly refined the original headline categories of the Forage database. They are now:

Policy

Research

Practice

Commentaries and Voices

Opinion and News

Projects

Knowledge Sources

Each change has occurred because of the nature of the expanding material and from a clearer understanding of the boundaries that can be drawn between the categories. Sub-categories have been spawned as need arose and logic allowed. At the time of writing there are XX sub-categories.

EU funding for the ForAge project ceases at the end of the calendar year 2014. Of course, in a Project such as ForAge, discussions about outcomes and future sustainability started almost as soon as the Project began its work. It is most probable that the chief functions of ForAge will continue after the end of the Project but most likely within a varying format as a number of partners take responsibility for different functions and develop them in concert and/ or in line with the missions of their own organisations. AEA will continue its role with the ForAge database and will continue to develop it as part of its own mission. It will also seek to publish, from time to time, reviews of the material available in the database and to disseminate and develop the material as the basis of debates, investigation and innovation. (Forage Progress report, 2013; Benyon *et al.* 2013).

5

It seems useful to conclude this paper by making a preliminary attempt to answer the question “what does the development of the ForAge database tell us about knowledge of later-life learning? The provisional nature of the answer stems not only from the ambition of the question but also from the facts that the database is still developing and the ForAge project is not finished.

We confine ourselves to four points of discussion:

- 1) It seems to us that in the field of later-life learning in Europe there is an abundance of statements of strong and intense advocacy, commitment, opinion and concern about the importance of later-life learning and the need for its expansion. However, there is not a commensurate large volume of successful research nor of complementary research programmes and well-defined paths for future research. We do not see them in the database. There are some; there are more if we spread the boundaries of what we define as the field. A truly broad definition of later-life learning *activity* which spills over into adjacent disciplines and area of study will capture a respectable number (but at the cost of coherence). The Forage proposal documents are right that there has been a great deal of identifiable later-life learning activity over, say, the last thirty years but it has often been activity of the workshop, project, advocacy and networking kind. However we define them, it does not usually give rise to new concepts, new ideas and new knowledge. There is an element of recycling and re-inforcement of old concepts, familiar ideas and deeply-held certainties.

- 2) If that is true, we have to ask why. Comparing the field of later-life learning to other fields of learning and education, it seems that this field is relatively diffuse and ill-defined. There is a different valency in the knowledge; it does not combine so strongly together. Potentially later-life learning deals with all human 'learning' over a period of up to fifty years – from, say, age 50 years to age 100 years or more. It can include older people of all cultures, nationalities and types, rich and poor, well-educated or with limited educational background, healthy or sick, in paid work or not, in face-to-face or virtual family units or isolated, happy or miserable. Yet it often deals in objectives, enquiries, observations, conclusions and recommendations that apply to any or all of these older people. Knowledge and opinion from the other levels of education and learning – early years learning; primary education; secondary school learning; higher education; workers' training, adult education, seem not to be like this. Research work, practice and policy seem to be more specific – perhaps simply because there are more people active in these fields and this generates clusters of work around promising foci. By comparison with other areas of learning, later-life learning is relatively marginalised. It is not a political and social priority; it has the triple handicaps of not seeming to contribute to national wealth, of being a minority interest and (bluntly) of being a shorter-term investment.
- 3) One way of defining knowledge is that it is a collection of answers to questions asked. One way of assessing the ForAge database is to ask what questions the knowledge it contains seeks to answer. There is a sense in which those questions seem not to be first order questions. Later-life learning is not one of the first order issues which European society recognises in connection with older people - those issues include health, social inclusion, housing, access to services, security, poverty, physical and mental ageing, wellbeing and others. Later-life learning is not defined intrinsically but by virtue of connections proposed between it and first-order issues. Such interest as there is, is in later-life learning perceived extrinsically as 'activity' rather than intrinsically as an expression of self. Thus learning activity can improve health, delay cognitive decline, promote wellbeing, reduce social exclusion, even help to earn money. The database shows only glimpses of later-life learning as a first order activity – of knowledge of how, for example, later-life learning may be a way intrinsically to increase of happiness, meaning in life and sense of identity. Apart from some intergenerational work, there is little discourse about the roles of older people, with their accumulated life experience and knowledge, as sources of learning.
- 4) Working on the database has raised questions in the minds of AEA personnel about their own constructs of knowledge. Developing protocols for the classification of materials and answering questions about whether a report or article is 'research' or 'commentary' or 'opinion' are not straightforward and automatic. An author's work which, by all external signs, should automatically be classified as 'research' may contain statements of opinion that have only the loosest connection with the empirical content. Empirical content is presented with greater or lesser validity. A piece claiming to be little more than 'commentary', and with no apparent ambitions to be

anything more, may nevertheless contain sufficient breadth, depth and creativity to have the potential of stimulating research ideas more easily than another piece overtly laying claim to be a paper on theory. A summary of information may carry more 'knowledge' than a literature review; a policy statement may have an evidence-based preamble more succinct than many academic digests and a sequence of quotations drawn unsystematically from 'voices' of older learners may contain insights of such shining clarity that they become 'known' and more influential than the balanced, cautious summaries of an academic paper. In other words, working on the ForAge database diverts one from a safe and stable academic enclave in which knowledge is what is 'known', evidenced, demonstrated and contained in research and academic literature. It raises doubts about whether this knowledge really is different in kind and distinct from all the other material of varying provenance which may have been assumed, believed, remembered, estimated, or felt but not 'known'. It diverts one to a more flexible and shifting, but perhaps more stimulating, knowledge world in which there are gradations of 'knowing' leading from the absolute knowledge of, say, numbers to the hints and folk wisdom of the 'voices'

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EST (European Shared Treasure): <http://www.europeansharedtreasure.eu/>

ForAge Project: <http://www.foragenetwork.eu/en/>

Healthy and Active Ageing (EuroHealth):

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