



What “silver surfers” can teach us: exploring digital skills courses for older adults

Having the necessary skills for staying in contact with friends and relatives through digital devices is crucial in today’s world. As the current COVID-19 pandemic shows, this holds especially true for the elderly. Being quarantined and restricted from physically meeting people, various communication technologies are more important than ever for staying social and informed on current events. In nursing homes, staff members are now finding new ways for staying in touch with family members by assisting residents in making video calls with mobile devices.

But what if elderly people cannot rely on personal assistance for accessing these alternative means of communication? This raises the general question of how older people can and do learn to use such technologies. Although the internet is full of guides and instructional videos on how to use smartphones or tablets, they are a cold comfort to someone who may not even know what an internet browser is.

Especially for digital newcomers, the tried and true method of face-to-face instruction is invaluable. While many older people turn to their children or grandchildren for help in all things digital, courses specifically tailored for elderly users are also increasingly popular.

More and more governmental initiatives and associations indeed acknowledge the already existing interest of elderly citizens in digital tools and their growing need to receive customized training (e.g. “[SeniorSurf](#)” and “[Kansalaisen digitaidot](#)” in Finland or “[Silver Tipps](#)” in Germany). For a researcher of social interaction, these courses can also provide a valuable window for discovering what it looks and sounds like to learn to use essential but sometimes alien technologies.

Learning about learning in adult education courses

Both researchers and the general public tend to focus on younger peoples’ digital lives and habits; digital device use is certainly more pervasive and observable among them. This has led to the still existing assumption that the younger generation allegedly has a better and more intuitive understanding of communication technologies.

However, the way in which both younger and older adults autonomously learn how to use mobile devices is something that happens incidentally and mostly unobserved. Special courses in digital training therefore offer a condensed time span in which some of these learning processes become visible.

For this reason, we have decided to take a closer look at adult education courses that provide introductions to smartphones, tablets or computers. Within a work package of the “[Smart Communication](#)” project (funded by the Eudaimonia Institute of the University of Oulu and the Academy of Finland), we investigate the way in which mostly elderly users are instructed to get a handle on mobile devices.

This is motivated by a double aim. On the one hand, the understanding of the existing and newly acquired skills of elderly participants offers the possibility to compare their digital practices with those of the younger generation. On the other hand, this will reveal what kind of challenges we face in general when learning to use new technologies.

Our current data set includes adult education courses in two different countries, Finland and Germany. Using participant observation and multi-angle video recordings allows us to study

the details of all the activities taking place in these educational settings, regarding both the instructors' and the students' practices.



Challenges for digital newcomers beyond cultural differences

A first comparison of the Finnish and German data reveals quite a few similarities with respect to the senior citizens' skills and problems. Regardless of their nationality, older adults are a quite heterogeneous group of users: some participants simply wish to discover a few more tricks or new apps to use on their newest phone; yet others come to class with the phone offered by their children still in its original packaging, hoping for the instructor to set it up from the scratch.

This makes teaching such courses challenging for both the instructors and their students: how many technical details should the introduction of a new app include, and what kind of functions and gadgets are truly useful and understandable for all the participants?

Moreover, an endless variety of device types, interfaces, and versions of operating systems makes it impossible to formulate and follow universally applicable and complete instructions. For the participants, localizing and identifying a precise file or application on their own devices is one of the frequently encountered challenges, and they complain about “being lost” within the device interfaces or about apps “simply disappearing”.

Due to unfamiliar technical terminology or the applications being hidden behind multiple menus or in specific folders, successfully navigating to the desired applications on the smartphone becomes a taxing undertaking.

As a result, when older users encounter a problem, describing or demonstrating it to someone in order to get help is often very challenging. How do you ask for help when you don't really know what the problem is and lack the technical vocabulary to describe it?

This is one of the research topics addressed in the Smart Communication project: we aim at uncovering how elderly users and their teachers use linguistic and embodied means for co-formulating and jointly understanding “unknown” problems regarding the use of digital devices.

Lending a (digital) hand

Any professional adult educator would likely argue that teaching the elderly requires a specific set of approaches. The pedagogical theory of geragogy suggests that repetition, hands-on learning, and allowing as much time as possible for learning are all particularly important when teaching older students.

At the same time, the classroom has its own limitations: the class only lasts for a certain time, often making it impossible to apply the ideal methods in every situation.

When a student encounters a problem that they cannot get past, a professional teacher should ideally enable them to find a solution independently and, in case of digital skills courses, to increase their digital autonomy.

In the courses we observed, the students quite often turn to their fellow pupils for help and engage in spontaneous peer-learning and teaching.

However, if the problem can't be solved by neither the student seeking for help nor their fellow student, the instructor avoids explaining it anew, but usually lends a hand. In the observed settings this means that the instructor takes hold of the device in order to fix the problem themselves.

How and when exactly do teachers handle the students' devices; and how does the teacher then balance between giving space to admittedly time-consuming autonomous learning and “fast-track” direct assistance that doesn't necessarily foster the students' digital skills? Within the Smart Communication project, we are interested in such moments where step-by-step instructing and immediate problem-solving meet and seemingly clash.



What “silver surfers” can teach us

When investigating digital device use among the elderly, it is easy to focus on problems and obstacles. While previous studies do show that the elderly struggle both with hardware and software related issues, they also show that they are not digital deniers who grudgingly adopt new technologies solely out of necessity.

Enjoyment, expressiveness and self-actualization have all been proven to be important motivators for the elderly in going digital. By understanding how exactly participants of digital skills courses explain, instruct, ask questions or display (non)understanding, we will be able to improve ways for making digital devices accessible to everyone – and to learn more about the mundane skills it really takes in order to thrive in our digital society.

This will not only be valuable knowledge for instructors and decision makers in the domain of adult education but can also help all of us make new communication technologies more usable for our elderly family members and friends – which is fundamental especially in times of crisis.

Last but not least, this might also teach us something new about technologies and digital communication that we thought we already mastered.

Photos of "silver surfers": Joonas Råman

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