

Mission Knowledge



www.missionknowledge.se

2013-12-20

Can elderly people contribute to the renewal of the knowledge-based society?

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It has been a long time since the terms “the information society” and “the knowledge-based society” first appeared, and there have been enormous advances in technology during the last few decades. However, there remain many old socio-cultural notions which obscure the view. One of them is the notion — which has been reinforced rather than simply remaining unchanged — that it is only the young, and to a limited extent the middle-aged, that can contribute to renewal in the form of the growth of knowledge. The elderly are most often excluded.

*This paper describes the background and implementation of the project **Mission Knowledge**. 20 senior participants (retired or soon to retire) with professional background in the field of care and welfare for the elderly have been recruited for one year's intense work, aiming at developing their insights to make them more grounded and valuable for the future. The project is a part of out of "Better life for older adults with complex health conditions", <http://english.skl.se/activities/better-life>, run by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SALAR, <http://english.skl.se>.*

Mission Knowledge has a twofold structure. One part is concerned with the participants' knowledge and experience in their particular areas, and is conducted under academic supervision. The other part is of a general nature and is designed to catch the broader potential of this venture. Both the individual contributions, an analysis of the process and the results will be submitted to SALAR not later than September 2014.

The 20 people participating in *Mission Knowledge* are not paid — they offer their time, knowledge and experience simply because they want to give

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something back to society. Project funds provide for workshops and supervision, travel expenses and accommodation in connection with the workshops and a certain amount of literature. What the participants gain (besides the straightforward pleasure of participating) is the academic supervision, the sense of fellowship with the other participants and the chance to develop and reinvigorate their knowledge.

The project is administered by the Swedish Institute for Health Sciences (*Vårdalinstitutet*) at Lund University. The institute has a long experience of turning to account knowledge and experience within the sphere of care and welfare in close co-operation with healthcare providers and workplaces. The institute is also constantly concerned with the associated epistemological, philosophical and gnosiological questions.

Background

That significant demographic changes are under way is well-known. The age pyramid is in the process of turning into an age *house*, with almost vertical walls and a fairly flat roof. Our ageing population has frequently been the subject of *quantitative* (chiefly economic) analysis — but not often of *qualitative*. Seldom have such questions as the following been asked:

What difference is it going to make that so many people are going to be so old under conditions so far removed from those which prevailed just a generation ago? What will it mean that a person during their old age (which may constitute as much as a third of their life) will see better, hear better, be able to move better, have less pain? And what are these elderly people going to want to *do* under such unprecedented conditions?

At present we are in a transition phase and it will take us a few years more to begin freeing ourselves from the prevailing notions concerning what, say, a 75-year-old person “should” think, want or do.

Changes in the elderly age-group

Clear-cut medical data and growing experience show that a 75-year-old person today is much the same as a 65-year-old person belonging to the previous generation. The international consulting and research company Kairos Future summed up their 2012 study of the elderly by stating that elderly people under 80 are “like anybody else”. And in a major health study carried out by the pharmacy group Apoteket the same year (where questions were asked about diet, exercise, experienced physical health and experienced mental health) it was the 66+ group that had the best health. Thus there is now not only geriatric illness but also geriatric *health*. In a study entitled “Young People” presented in 2010 (carried out by Demoscop on behalf of the Centre for Contemporary Analysis) it emerged with crystal clarity that the group of the active elderly who have the experience, energy, capacity and desire to perform skilled work is expanding. Twenty-five per cent of those in the 65–89 age-range were in this group, despite the fact that age segregation is still manifest and that society’s stance with regard to elderly people who want to go on working remains unstable. It can be clearly seen from the

Swedish Government Official Report on the Age of Retirement (spring 2013) (<http://www.sou.gov.se/sb/d/17425>) that great changes are under way.

Contributing to the development of knowledge after retirement

The first well-educated generation is now retiring. Many of these people are enthusiastic about continuing to use and develop their professional knowledge, first and foremost in order to give something back to society. There is no problem as long as it is just a question of *broadening* this knowledge: the adult educational associations, pensioners' associations, the universities of the third age and the internet make it easier than ever before to improve oneself. At the (ordinary) universities, too, there can be found elderly people with special interests who are studying for, say, a Master's degree. However, the opportunities for such people to influence their education or to turn to account the particular knowledge and experience they have acquired during perhaps 40 years of working life are limited. From the university's point of view, they should fall into line and be like the students coming from upper secondary school — otherwise they have no business being at university at all. There has previously been very, very little opportunity to begin an academic education in line with what has been learnt during a long professional life.

Some comparisons

Young PhD students can look forward to long working lives (at a university or elsewhere) and will plenty of time to develop their research and monitor its effects. Those who are middle-aged, on the other hand, have few years of gainful employment before them. On the other hand what they have to offer may have more depth because of the knowledge and experience they have acquired over the years. It will then largely be the task of others in the same field to preserve and build on these people's findings.

That people who have reached retirement age should want to take part in something like *Mission Knowledge* (and perhaps thereafter spend a further 5–10 years building up their knowledge to postgraduate level, thereby making it even more valuable and accessible for others in the years to come) has hitherto been virtually inconceivable. Yet it is perfectly in line with the classical ideal of knowledge as being sustainable over time and space, independently of any particular person but passed from one person to another. The immaterial nature of knowledge makes it independent of how long its originator, the particular person behind it, may continue to be active.

Present-day brain research

The 20th century brought many scientific findings concerning what *deteriorates* in an ageing brain. During the present century, however, there has been increasing interest in studying the brain's *lifelong development* rather than just its peak and decline, and there have been major breakthroughs: we now know, for example, that old people, too, get new cerebral cells; that the brain continues to be plastic; and that the balance between the left and right halves of the brain (between thought and feeling, that is) becomes *better*, not worse, the older we get. When we are old we

quite simply ask other questions than when we were young — we become more teleological, which is to say more interested in purpose and meaning and less interested in mechanistic causation. And we can continue to be creative — though in other ways and with other expression than when we were young.

The older one gets, the slower one gets at learning details and the faster one gets at forgetting them. But the ability to perceive how things are related to one another (including both the perception of new relationships and the remembrance of old) remains unchanged or may even improve. Gene D. Cohen (*The Mature Mind*, Basic Books, 2005) provides an excellent introduction to the change in perspective and its background in research.

A time for giving something back — a time with purpose and meaning

The older we get, the more we tend to search for coherence, purpose and a sense of significance, at the same time as we are glad to support younger people as much as we can. Thus it is not only the rich and prosperous who in their old age can feel that the time has come to give something back (by becoming patrons of the arts, for instance) — other people, too, have the desire to give something back, and often the fulfilment of this desire is a question of passing on knowledge.

The passing on of knowledge from one generation to another has previously been hampered by the desire of the young to be independent. Now, however, the internet has made it possible to lay out “ready-prepared” knowledge that young people can access without fear of losing any of their independence (since this knowledge does not come *directly* from older people). But this is not the whole story, since many elderly people have had intensive working lives which have not given them time to mould their perceptions into something with a long-term existence outside their own heads. What they have learnt is thus valid for themselves but not in the public sphere. If, then, such people are to be able to put their knowledge and experience into order, give it a structure and build on it, they are likely to need a lot of help, constructive criticism and inspiration from others. *Mission Knowledge* exists in order to facilitate this process and thereby foster the dissemination of the participants’ knowledge and experience for the benefit of others.

Design for the human sector

My own special interest with regard to the elderly is the place of technology in “the human sector” (see *Människonära design* [Humane Design], Studentlitteratur, 2005, <http://www.arkiv.certec.lth.se/dok/manniskonaradesign/>), which is to say the sector where people work with and for others. For this reason I am especially interested in the *Mission Knowledge* participants who want to deepen their knowledge concerning the future integration of technology into the sphere of the elderly — technology such as can make life easier for elderly people (see *Empati och High Tech* [Empathy and High-Tech], 2012, progress report from the project *Långsiktig Efterfrågan på Vårldstjänster*

[Long-term demand for welfare services],
<http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/20/40/43/08a34c17.pdf>).

There is still little awareness of the special requirements of a well-functioning interplay between human beings and technology, and for this reason the use of technology within the sphere of the elderly is often inappropriate. Against this background it will be fascinating to see what contribution the *Mission Knowledge* participants with perhaps 40 years of experience of working within the sphere of the elderly will be able to make — what contribution in the spirit of Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality* (Marion Boyars, 2001) and (constituting what seems to me the most successful recent embodiment of this spirit) Per-Olof Hedvall's dissertation presented in 2009 and entitled *Aktivitetdiamanten. Modellering av en vidareutvecklad tillgänglighet* [The Activity Diamond: modelling of a developed accessibility], http://www.certec.lth.se/fileadmin/certec/PeO_Hedvall/Hedvall_Doktorsavhandling_Aktivitetdiamanten_20091204.pdf.

Possible effects

The potential for the generation of new knowledge through *Mission Knowledge* is self-evident: people who have within them some 40 “growth rings” of ever-broadening professional knowledge and experience are in a particularly good position to discern patterns and relationships.

The gain for the participants themselves consists chiefly in the opportunity for giving something back. Then there is the pleasure of discovery in one's own sphere of interest, promoted by the supervision and by the closeness to the other participants and the researchers. Furthermore the commitment to the project may bring about improvement in one's own health.

The gain for the workplaces consists in the incentive to development provided by feedback in the form of developed experience-based knowledge.

The gain for the universities consists in the new lines of research and external contacts opened up by the participants, also in the challenge of functioning as arenas for in-depth academic discussion over time.

The gain for cultural life consists in the different and broader development of knowledge, involving a closer relationship between thought and feeling.

The gain for society consists in the fact that more people will be able to make a contribution to the common good long after retirement.

State of the art

Twenty participants having been chosen from among 28 applicants, *Mission Knowledge* started September 2–3 2013. The progress of the project can be followed by way of <http://www.uppdragkunskap.se>. The field is free, not only with regard to what the participants may want to contribute individually but also with regard to more general topics.

Examples of questions that might be taken up are the following:

What sort of teaching can best contribute to a future-oriented integration of experience and knowledge acquired at different ages and under different conditions?

The essence of *Mission Knowledge* is being able to contribute, to *give*. What gift-economic principles and concepts will prove relevant and viable here? Modern brain research has shown that the interplay between the left and right halves of the brain improves right up to when one is in one's eighties. This means that the older we get, the better is the integration of our thoughts and feelings. Will something in the contribution of these 20 pioneers bring this out?

You can't know until you've tried

I find myself thinking now, as I've thought many times before: *you can't know until you've tried*. It's true, you really can't — and that's why it gives me such pleasure not only to have conceived the project *Mission Knowledge* but also to be playing a prominent part in its realisation.