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Interview: Retired Tradespeople Help Ease Students Into Workforce

A unique project matches up vocational students with retired tradespeople in a small German town. The program helps to ease students into working life and expand their range of training options.

Dr. Wolfgang Strotmann recently wrote about the project in the Journal of Intergenerational Relationships (March 7, 2012).

To learn more, AHB caught up with Dr. Strotmann, a professor at the University of Osnabrück in Germany.

Ruth Dempsey: This is an exciting project. How did it get started?

Wolfgang Strotmann: Staff at the August-Claas-School in Harsewinkel had been working for some time to improve their vocational program. They wanted to strengthen courses in the practical occupational fields.

The school acquired additional space by building a workshop at the site of a former nursery located less than two kilometers from the school. The new venue was a good size, and the former greenhouse had optimal lighting and high ceilings ideal for industrial and technical training.

But the school found there was a lack of skilled instructors in many of the trades, ranging from interior building to automobile technology to roofing to carpentry.

The challenge was to find specialized personnel quickly and on a limited budget!

RD: How did you attract retirees?

WS: It was slow going, initially. First, organizers approached former workers of the Claas Company, a manufacturer of agricultural machinery. With 2,500 workers, the company is the biggest employer in Harsewinkel, and it has an active pensioners club.

The school also used its contacts to reach former tradespeople in the town. The project caught the attention of one well-known retiree in the community. And one of the students recruited his grandfather. Gradually, news of the project spread among the pensioners.

Eventually, the organizers attracted a group of specialists with 40 or 50 years of experience.

RD: So the teachers and retirees met to get things underway.

WS: That's right. The pensioner contacted the teacher and arranged a personal meeting. The approach worked well because it gave the teacher a chance to show the tradesperson the factory work floor and provided an opportunity to get to know one another.

Following on the meeting, the teacher acted as the regular contact person for the retiree. This arrangement is essential for close cooperation.

RD: The project launched with 10 pensioners.

WS: Yes, the technology teachers and tradespeople met regularly. They organized a number of work projects and established workgroups in a wide range of fields:

- gardening and landscaping
- drywall installation
- bicycle mechanics
- building construction
- metal processing
- carpentry
- engineering
- roofing
- warehouse logistics
- photovoltaic
- automobile technology
- commercial practice (bookkeeping, distribution, personnel management), and
- agriculture

RD: How did young and old hit it off?

WS: This was a concern, initially. How would young students and conservative retirees mesh? But we needn't have worried. They hit it off right away. The youngsters welcomed the pensioners as experts in their trades.

RD: What about the teachers?

WS: Schools are not structured to work in this manner, so the teachers had to adapt to a new role. For the first few teaching units, the students worked solely with their subject teacher. Later, the retiree was brought in as an expert to help the group achieve its goals.

The teachers also did a lot of the behind-the-scenes organizing, fundraising and so on.

RD: Sounds like the project was a success . . .

WS: It was huge success. A win-win!

The students gained competency in the various trades and grew both personally and professionally.

The pensioners felt needed. They expanded their social network by meeting other pensioners, and they grew in their understanding and appreciation of the younger generation.

And the teachers broadened their professional horizons by teaming up with seasoned experts. They also got new insights into the vocational abilities of their students.

RD: The community was wonderfully responsive . . .

WS: The community provided broad support for the project. For example, they covered a share of the rent for the nursery and helped with heating costs. Several businesses donated materials. Monies from birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas gifts were directed to the project.

Also, many community organizations asked various workgroups to do work for them. For example, one group built a complete wood frame house and another made several church benches. One organization placed an order for a metal barbecue grill, and another workgroup was charged with the repair and lease of the Christmas-market huts.

These successes inspired firms and various members of the community to support the different projects.

RD: Your study looked at conditions that facilitate intergenerational projects. What did you learn?

WS: At the school level, the secret is to begin small. Organization is critical. So, a top-notch organizational team is required. Set clear tasks. Don't think too much – just do it! More broadly, there is a need to develop educational policy to support intergenerational projects at the school level. Also, organizational strategies to facilitate intergenerational learning need to be integrated into the teacher education program. The projects also require financial support.

RD: This project has gained wide applause. It even took third place in the “Deutscher Lehrepreis” (German Teacher’s Award) in 2010. What do you see as some of the benefits?

WS: The project demonstrates what is possible for students. It shows that they are capable of doing high-quality work.

It highlights how community members can contribute to the school curriculum in a very positive way.

And, it illustrates the potential of an intergenerational approach in helping students transition to working life.

RD: What's next?

WS: I would like to see vocational projects expanded to other fields of activity such as hairdressing, precision instruments, mechanics and upholstery.

More generally, it would be nice to see working groups that spanned the generations: kindergarten children, students from the different grade levels, adults and seniors.

Clearly, intergenerational projects offer a host of possibilities for schools and communities. I expect they will become more widespread in the future.

Study: Older Men Care For Spouses

A Swedish study offers a telling glimpse into the emotional lives of older men, caring for a spouse at home. They are a group whose voices are rarely heard.

Jonas Sandberg and Henrik Eriksson of Mälardalen University interviewed a small group of carers from a medium-sized town in the south of Sweden. The men were aged 65 to 78 years, and all had adult children. Their spouses suffered from dementia, stroke and Huntington's disease. The study was part of a larger project *Men as Caregivers in Late Life*.

Details of the study appeared in the journal *Quality in Ageing – Policy, Practice and Research* (Vol. 8, 2007).

Coping with change

The participants had been married for between 20 and 40 years. The study found that the wives' illness shattered the men emotionally and transformed their marital relationships,

“The most difficult thing is that we can't do anything anymore,” one carer said. “But I have to look back to all the things we used to do . . . live on the memories.”

The men maintained the idea of being a couple by finding things to do together.

One participant took his wife downtown in a wheelchair to do some shopping or go to the post office. Another man's spouse continued to accompany the family to the cabin for winter visits. “Even if I had to carry her up the stairs she had to come with us,” he said.

New role

The findings showed the men approached the practical aspects of caregiving by thinking of it as a “new working situation.”

For example, “John” described how he reconstructed the kitchen and built a wheelchair ramp for his wife. Another man developed a plan to help his wife rehabilitate after a stroke. And “Steven” learned to cook so that he could be as good as his wife “Karen” was.

In fact, participants kept their spirits alive by setting clear goals and meeting them.

As for social relationships, the study found the men’s world contracted during the period they spent caring for their spouses – between one and 12 years. They received little support from their male neighbours and friends.

“They say that they’re sorry for me,” one man remarked.

No place like home

The participants worked hard to maintain close ties with their partners, especially by avoiding a move into a care home.

John described what happened when his wife, who has dementia, wakes at night: “Turn on the light,” she says. “Hold my hand.”

“Who the hell will hold her hand or turn on the light in a nursing home?” He asked.

Steven said he longed for the times when his children came to give him a few hours of rest. He was upset by their calls to move their mother into a nursing home because she needed more help. For now, he is determined not to “give up,” and to take one day at a time.

The men were convinced that, if the situation were reversed, their wives would have cared for them at home for as long as possible.

Timely support

This study opens a rare window into how older men cope with caring for a spouse in a domestic situation. Findings showed the men experienced their wives’ illness as a major source of stress.

The men’s stories shed light on how they created new roles and coped with changes in their marital relationship.

Researchers emphasized the need for timely and effective support. They called for the development of programs based on the experiences of active caregivers. Such programs, they noted, would empower carers and reduce stress.

Interview: Travelling New Roads at 60

At 60, a chemist becomes a standup comedian. A 69-year-old teacher becomes a furniture maker. A 60-something carpenter and his wife volunteer in Ethiopia with Habitat for Humanity.

It's never too late to learn something new.

*More and more of us are taking up new challenges at a time when we are supposed to be thinking about retirement. In his insightful new book, *The Idea of Leisure* (Transaction Publishers), Robert Stebbins reveals how we can use "serious leisure" to unlock our dreams and do the things we've always wanted to.*

Dr. Stebbins is the author of 37 books and scores of articles. He is faculty professor in the department of sociology at the University of Calgary. A fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences and the Royal Society of Canada, he is also an amateur musician.

AHB reached him in Calgary

Ruth Dempsey: So what is serious leisure?

Robert Stebbins: Activities known as serious leisure – those of amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers – are pursued using unique combinations of skill, knowledge and experience.

Think civic orchestra concerts, public "star nights" run by amateur astronomers and volunteers helping with athletic games.

They demand a commitment of time and energy and sometimes money in learning new skills.

Serious leisure pursuits contribute enormously to the development of individuals and, often, to the well-being of the community.

RD: What about our early enthusiasms? Do we return to them in the later years?

RS: Retirees do sometimes take up the serious leisure they loved at an earlier age. They may also take up new serious leisure, bearing in mind, however, that any such activity takes time and effort.

For example, it may take a good three years to master the violin to the point where the musician will be welcome in the back desks of the local civic orchestra. And this assumes assiduous practice and a high tolerance for the initial scratching that inevitably comes with learning this instrument.

The payoffs are significant. For one thing, serious leisure activities can be exhilarating. They are also absorbing and respectable enough to be real substitutes for work. In fact for some retirees, this leisure is considerably *more* absorbing and possibly more respectable than their work was.

Add to that the buzz of learning to play a new instrument, building a beautiful table, or observing, as an amateur scientist, a stirring natural phenomenon. Not to mention the rewards of interacting with others, who share your leisure passion.

RD: Some retirees turn to new hobbies – photography, restoring antiques and outdoor adventures.

RS: On the whole, hobbies are easier to master to a satisfying and fulfilling level than the amateur activities. That is, many hobbies are not substantially based on physical skill, among them collecting, some outdoor activities and the reading hobbies. Still, doing these well does require a good bit of knowledge and, in many instances, a good bit of experience.

The key for all the serious pursuits is discovering both a taste and an aptitude for them. Our neophyte violinist might love the music but find that he or she has limited manual dexterity or a weak ear for tonality.

RD: You describe museum volunteering as serious leisure. How so?

RS: Any volunteering that is truly voluntary is leisure. And all serious leisure is, among other things, putting in time and effort doing something that the participant wants to do and is reasonably capable of doing.

This is true for amateurs and hobbyists, but this holds as well for volunteers. Volunteering is altruistic activity. Volunteers want to help another person, organization or make an impact on an important problem.

Casual volunteering – handing out groceries at the local food bank or taking tickets at the door – requires little experience. By contrast, serious or career volunteering does rest on knowledge and experience. Working effectively with autistic children, for example, or volunteering as a guide at a zoo or historical site.

RD: Organizations like [Cross-Cultural Solutions](#), report an increase in volunteers aged 50-plus. Participants say they are looking for adventure. Some want to experience a different culture with their children or grandchildren.

RS: Much of volunteering, even the career variety, involves learning while in the volunteer position. The career volunteer learns a great deal – gains considerable personal fulfillment – yet does not usually have to bring to the position substantial training or even, at times, experience.

So, older adults can find interesting accessible leisure in volunteering whether they want to help out at home or abroad.

RD: And leisure builds community . . .

RS: This is important point. For one thing, leisure plays an important role in generating social capital. Shared strong leisure interests can bring people together who would not otherwise have anything to do with each other.

This happens with community sports teams, arts groups, hobbyist clubs and teams of volunteers for arts festivals and museums, to mention a few.

Not only do these groups contribute to a strong community ethos – concerts, plays, athletic contests, exhibits and so on – they create social solidarity by enabling people who are initially strangers to get to know one another.

RD: What advice do you have for individuals nearing retirement?

RS: Get to know your leisure options, including realistically your taste and aptitude for various activities. Choose one or a few, and set out to make them your activities.

But which activities? Seeing a list of some of them may help. Check out the resources at [Serious Leisure Perspective](#) and [Deep Fun](#).

When optimal, a person's leisure lifestyle is usually composed of a combination of serious and casual leisure, possibly with some leisure projects mixed in.

These one-shot leisure projects have the advantage of being relatively short in duration. For example, the chance to build community by organizing a local food drive. Or, the sense of group involvement while participating in a skit or a one-time backpacking trip.

In the long run, a high quality of life flows from leisure pursuits that allow people to reach their full potential. Each person must find his or her own road.

Notable Book: Talking Creativity

Want to exercise your creative muscles, and looking for inspiration to get started? You might want to check out *The Creative Habit* (Simon & Schuster) by Twyla Tharp and Mark Reiter.

Tharp, a pioneering U.S. choreographer, has created more than 130 dances for her own company, as well as for American Ballet Theater, Paris Opera Ballet, the Royal Ballet and others. Past works include:

- *Hair*
- *Ragtime*
- *Amadeus* with Milos Forman
- *Nightspot* with Elvis Costello; and
- *Cutting Up* with Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Now 71, Tharp believes creativity is not just for artists. It is within the reach of everyone. All it takes is a willingness to make creativity a habit.

In illuminating detail, she shares what she has learned over five decades about planning, organizing and working with others.

Tharp explores her creative history and encourages us to discover our own creative identity through a series of practical exercises. Tharp is frank about her own fears and struggles. She even gives a recipe for getting out of a rut, and in Chapter 10, she offers tips on how to deal with feelings of uncertainty and recover from failure.

Begin with ritual

For Tharp, rituals are must-learn habits, especially preparation rituals. She wakes at 5:30 each morning, dons her gym clothes, steps outside her Manhattan home and hails a taxi. She tells the driver to take her to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st Street and First Avenue, where she works out for two hours. This ritual anchors her morning.

“The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual.” Rituals are decisive patterns of behaviour: no thinking required. “It’s a simple act, but doing it the same way each morning habitualizes it – makes it repeatable, easy to do.”

Ritual can be as simple as lighting a candle or putting on music. The artist gives these examples: Stravinsky playing a Bach fugue each day when he entered his studio; a chef tending herbs in his garden to kick start his day; and the painter playing pounding music to get her into a groove.

Get organized

Tharp starts every project with a cardboard box, the kind you can get at Staples for transferring files. She throws everything related to the project into the labeled box.

“The box makes me feel organized, that I have my act together even when I don’t know where I’m going yet.”

Take, for example, the box for her hit musical *Movin' Out* (based on the songs of Billy Joel). Initially, it contained:

- demo tape to sell idea to Billy Joel
- two blue index cards with stated goals for the show
- videos of Billy Joel's lectures to hear what he thought of his songs
- movies from 1965 to 1984, including U.S. Army training films from the Vietnam era
- green beret that belonged to the military adviser she consulted for the show's night patrol sequence; and
- earrings and macramé vest that sparked her thinking about costumes.

Eventually, the material for the show filled 12 boxes.

The box strategy can also be used as an evaluation tool. After each project, Tharp asks herself: How did I do? Did I get to my goal? Did I move beyond it? Did it change along the way? Could I have done it more efficiently?

Scratch for ideas

The artist finds it tough to come up with ideas for new works. To cope, she has developed an approach she calls "scratching".

"You know how you scratch away at a lottery ticket to see if you've won? That's what I'm doing when I begin a piece."

She has two ironclad rules: only scratch among the best – the best composers, the best people and the best resources, and never scratch in the same place twice. Perhaps not surprisingly, Tharp believes the person you will be in five years depends on the people you meet and the books you read.

She scratches for ideas in everyday conversation and in nature. She browses through books and visits museums and exhibitions. She follows in the footsteps of her heroes and mentors – Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, Dostoyevsky, Yeats, Cézanne, Kurosawa and Balanchine – hoping to discover ideas that will spark her own.

The Creative Habit is an outstanding resource; it's an entertaining "how to" guide and a testament to an unwavering commitment to personal vision. It's bound to bolster your own desire to live creatively.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this review appeared in AHB Jan/Feb 2010.

ROUNDUP

NEW BLUEPRINT FOR ELDERLY CARE: Care4Care is an innovative scheme to support an aging population. The new initiative allows volunteers to invest in care credits for tomorrow by helping others today.

The “care pension” is the brainchild of Heinz Wolff, emeritus professor of bioengineering at Brunel University, London:

I see [Care4Care](#) as a form of mobilization where the community makes up its mind to do something the country desperately needs. If you put in a few hours every week over the years, lo and behold, when you get to 78 and are a bit creaky yourself you might have 5, 000 hours and get those back . . .

The 84-year-old scientist has teamed up with the Young Foundation. “We think there will always be a gap between what the government is prepared to fund and what the need is, and we need innovative solutions to bridge that gap,” says Simon Tucker, the foundation’s chief executive.

By 2015, Wolff and the Young Foundation are planning to have a national network in place.

The first leg of the scheme was launched last March on the Isle of Wight in partnership with Age UK. Around 90 volunteers have been banking care hours by helping older people with a whole range of tasks from trips to the shops to changing a light bulb.

Source: guardian.co.uk

TENDER PORTRAIT OF OLDER COUPLE CAPTURES TOP PRIZE: Last May, the Austrian director Michael Haneke won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival for his latest film, *Amour*. Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva starred as Georges and Anne, retired music teachers in their 80s struggling to cope with the effects of dementia.

“The point of the film is how you deal with the suffering of someone you love,” Haneke said in an interview.

Perhaps you might want to view other entries in the fine tradition of aging on the silver screen? Here is an international list of top picks from film buff [Robert Yahnke](#):

- *About Schmidt* (United States, 2002), directed by Alexander Payne
- *Antonia’s Line* (Holland, 1995), directed by Marleen Gorris

- *Central Station* (Brazil, 1998), directed by Walter Salles
- *The Dresser* (United Kingdom, 1983), directed by Peter Yates
- *The Grandfather* (Spain, 1998), directed by José Luis Garci
- *Ikiru* (Japan, 1951), directed by Akiru Kurosawa
- *Man on the Train* (France, 2003), directed by Patrice Leconte
- *Saraband* (Sweden, 2003), directed by Ingmar Bergman
- *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* (South Korea, 2003), directed by Ki-Duk Kim

STEPPING BOLDLY INTO THE KITCHEN: Chester Guttridge, 87, signed up for cooking classes three years ago when his wife became ill and he had to care for her.

Mike Wadge, 68, stares in awe at his perfectly risen orange and almond sponge. “I’ve baked a cake!” he says. “My wife will never believe it.”

Guttridge and Wadge are two of nine men attending cookery classes at Blackwell school, about 10 miles west of Bristol, England.

“Many are widowed or caring for ailing wives,” explains Jane Lewthwaite, community development officer at the charity Age UK Somerset.

The classes were launched three years ago in response to requests from older men for lessons in cooking and food shopping. Ads for classes were posted in pubs across the country.

[Age UK](http://www.ageuk.org.uk) estimates that more than 40,000 men around Britain have attended cooking sessions in the past five years.

Lewthwaite says: “These classes enable them to be self-sufficient and independent in their homes, but also get them out of the house and into the community.”

Guttridge agrees: “It’s doing things like this that keeps you going,” he says.

Source: guardian.co.uk

STILL PASSIONATE ABOUT ROLLER SKATING: Joyce and Arthur George glide effortlessly around Scooter’s Roller Palace in Mississauga, Ont. (Canada). Dubbed The

Flyers, the former amateurs are renowned for their roller skating repertoire that once included the foxtrot, quickstep and the waltz.

She's 89, and he's 90.

The couple, who live in Burlington, have been teaching adults how to dance on eight wheels for over 20 years.

On Thursday evenings, Arthur still teaches budding skaters his magic moves, while Joyce works with a mostly over-70 crowd of longtime skaters. They come in droves for the exercise and camaraderie, not to mention the home-baked treats Joyce brings to the rink for skaters to enjoy with fresh-brewed coffee.

The Georges have each suffered a heart attack, but they show few signs of slowing down.

"I'm not going to sit here and wait to die. I want to get out and enjoy life. And skating is the best part of life," Arthur says.

Source: thestar.com