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## Advanced stage of the computer skills training course for seniors – introducing the participants to the world of the internet (guidelines for teachers)

**Summary:** Using the internet is the most important part of the course for many of its participants. There are many ways in which the teacher can use the curiosity and the enthusiasm of the seniors to introduce them to the world of the internet. However, the instructor bears a great responsibility, since the quality of that first serious major contact of the seniors with the global Web depends largely on him. The teacher must also point out the potential dangers of using the Web to the participants of the course and show them the ways to avoid the threats. The knowledge that the instructor is to share is not uncomplicated; there are, however, certain simple ways to spread it successfully. The teacher should bear in mind that using the internet may be a practical skill making one's everyday life easier as well as an adventure and a source of great satisfaction.

**Key words:** seniors, the third age, the internet, course, self-education, the global village, hypertext, email, websites, new technology, security on the Web.

For many of the participants of the computer skills training course using the internet is the stage that they have been waiting for since its beginning. The moment is accompanied by numerous positive emotions, such as curiosity; however, certain anxiety – natural when walking down an unknown path – may be sensed, as well. The positive attitude constitutes a great advantage to the teacher and an excellent basis for the classes. Nevertheless, before getting to the point and realising the subsequent stage of the course it is necessary for the instructor to organise his basics, as well.

One must understand just how important the changes of the commonly available technology that took place in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are. M. McLuhan proposed that under the influence of modern technology our world shrinks to become a global village<sup>1</sup>. The author shows a connection between the rise of the new society and the spreading of non-specialised technology that – unlike the specialised technology – reconstructs tribal bonds<sup>2</sup>. It also leads to the return of the values typical of the preliterate cultures and a rebirth of the worldview similar to the preliterate one<sup>3</sup>. It is, therefore, a breakthrough which can compare with the invention of the printing machine and moving from the preliterate world to the literate world. Although M. McLuhan did not live to witness the beginnings of the internet, it is because of that medium that the global village described by him could actually come to life. The World Wide Web became a bridge between the literate world and the post-literate world.

Within the society relying on information technologies the individuals who cannot use the internet are often marginalised, in many ways – just like the illiterate in the societies relying on printed text. Apart from a lack of access to the advantages of the internet their common ground with the users of the Web is lost, and with it the chance for communication; they also remain outside one of the areas of public debate. Entering the virtual reality, becoming an internaut, has an enormous importance to the seniors. As J. Golonka states, it is not only the practical use of computers in the everyday (or professional) life of an individual, but it is mainly the issue of its lack of presence in awareness of that individual<sup>4</sup>. The computer skills training course becomes, therefore, a senior's initiation into the world of information technologies. The character of initiation is to introduce permanent changes to the individual's awareness. In this case it does not allow one to enter the global village (since seniors – as all the other social groups – live there already) inasmuch

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<sup>1</sup>) M. McLuhan, *Zrozumieć media*, J. M. Stokłosa (trans.) [in:] M. McLuhan, E. McLuhan, F. Zingorne (eds.), *Wybór tekstów*, Poznań 2001, p. 210–211.

<sup>2</sup>) Tamże, s. 231.

<sup>3</sup>) M. McLuhan, *Galaktyka Gutenberga*, J.M. Stokłosa (trans.) [in:] M. McLuhan, E. McLuhan, F. Zingorne (eds.), *op.cit.*, pp. 186–187.

<sup>4</sup>) J. Golonka, *Kurs obsługi komputera jako forma inicjacji informatycznej seniora na przykładzie słuchaczy Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku w Uniwersytecie Wrocławskim* [in:] L. Jakubowska-Malicka, A. Kobylarek, M. Pryszyk-Ciesielska (ed.), *Audiowizualność – Cyberprzeżyci – Hipertekstualność. Nowoczesne konteksty edukacji*, Wrocław 2009, 291.

as it causes one to participate in its life in an active and purposeful way. In the case of entering the world of internet, the instructor bears a great responsibility, since the quality of the senior's first contact with the virtual world and – to use the metaphor again – the successfulness of the initiation depend largely on him.

During the classes introducing the participants of the course to the world of the internet it is necessary to provide well-prepared teaching materials. They have to contain the definitions of the basic terms connected with the internet. The teacher should make sure that the materials he prepares:

1. Lack mistakes (especially important in the case of teachers who are not computer specialists);
2. Are easy to understand for the participants (especially important in the case of teachers who are computer specialists).

The terms that need to be defined (for the teacher himself as well as for the participants) are:

- The internet,
- WWW (World Wide Web),
- internet browser,
- address of a website,
- a link,
- Web search engine,
- email,
- email address,
- login,
- password.

The teacher needs to find such definitions that he himself will understand. The internet may be helpful, of course, especially the information to be found on Wikipedia. Explaining the basic terms, contrary to what one may believe, is of crucial importance – experienced users of the internet do not usually realise just how different the terms used while discussing the using of the Web are from the everyday language. In the course of the first contact the virtual reality appears to be quite distinct from the real world. Many of these terms have only some remote synonyms in the non-virtual reality. It is clear in the case of the term "login", "password", and "email address".

The teacher who is also an experienced user of the internet must describe the specific character of the Internet in a way that is easily understandable to the participants of the course. Such features of the discussed medium as:

- hypertextuality,
  - decentralisation,
  - innovativeness
- need to be explained.

Understanding the differences between a text and a hypertext is fundamental while accessing websites. A reader cannot interfere with the structure of a regular

text. One receives it in the form prepared by the author and needs to accept it as it is. A regular text is (typically) intended for linear reading, whereas a hypertext is of a nonlinear character and may be read in numerous ways. A reader is granted much more freedom during the contact with a hypertext; yet, one must also act consciously and know what one wants to do and how to do it as well as, in the case of making a wrong step, how to go back and fix the mistake. At this stage it is essential to emphasise the differences between the active and the inactive elements of a website. Attention must also be drawn to the need to distinguish between interesting information (which may be developed due to the hypertextual character of websites) and useless information (e.g. advertisements) that should be ignored. Browsing a website can be compared to skimming through a book, looking through a warehouse or searching for information in an encyclopaedia. The greatest number of similarities is probably to be found in the last example. One can start reading an encyclopaedia at any entry whatsoever and move to further ones following the cross-references that one may freely choose. Magazines should also be mentioned at this point, because due to a large number of colourful images contained therein they resemble popular websites.

In turn, the decentralisation of the internet may be perceived by the participants as dangerous chaos and lawlessness. In relation to this issue the attention must be drawn to its advantages – the opportunities for free exchange of thought and freedom of speech (with all possible consequences). Many of the seniors could have had contact with the image of the internet as presented in newspapers or the news on TV. While its usefulness is certainly mentioned therein, the dark sides – internet porn, paedophile circles, piracy, computer viruses, hacking databases and bank accounts – are discussed much more often. One's attention is strongly attracted by such information and they serve to create the general image of the internet as a dangerous environment. A practice must be set out to speak openly of both the chances and the risks while at the same time emphasising that following a number of safety rules the may allow one to benefit from the chances and to avoid the risks. The teacher might have to face a participants' attitude of a specific character – some believe that the internet is an interesting invention, but it definitely "needs some order". One can often hear the opinions that establishing one international institution aimed at controlling the information appearing on the Web and censoring and punishing the adverse internet users if need be would be a great solution. Such idealistic (at least in theory) speculations should be immediately cut short and both the impossibility of assuming full control over the internet and the ambivalent moral character of such control should be emphasised. The attempts at censoring the internet that are made repeatedly all over the world and the negative reaction that they trigger may serve as examples. The point of doing so is not only to introduce the seniors to the other, better side of the issue but also to make them more receptive of the purely demagogical promises to impose order in the internet that some politicians make. Positive solutions to the problem may be discussed at this point – e.g. moderation of the comments on news websites and internet forum posts, the voluntary character of following the rules of netiquette by the internet users and

punishing criminals instead of reducing the freedom of the medium, which is not only the means of committing a crime, as in some cases, but constitutes common good, as well. One must bear in mind that pornography existed before the invention of the internet and theft and fraud usually take place outside the web. It must be mentioned that an internet user is to be responsible for his own actions exclusively – some websites simply should not be accessed, if one is willing to avoid content that one may find offensive and one must also remember to adhere to the safety rules. It should be mentioned to the participants of the course that the denouncing the so-called "piracy" on the web is a false consensus. The phenomenon is complex and controversial. The problem cannot be explained sufficiently in but a few sentences, yet everyone could be encouraged to look for information on the subject by themselves - with the use of the internet. Thanks to this the seniors may not only learn more of the ongoing discussion on the notion of copyrights on the Web but are also given a chance to form their own opinions on the subject. They might find the ideas of the free software movement or free culture appealing.

One of the undoubtedly positive results of the decentralisation of the internet is its innovativeness. For the internet users it implies the need to be prepared for constant changes. The seniors must become accustomed to the fact that their knowledge will be regularly supplemented with subsequent elements with the introduction of new ways of creating websites or the development of internet browsers. The new information or solutions do not make the formerly acquired skills useless, they only complement them. To prepare the seniors to face innovation the teacher should show them many diverse websites in order to illustrate the similarities in their structure in contrast with the differences in details. They should be prepared for the fact that the image of a website as well as the internet browser may change overnight. That is why the knowledge of what to look for and how constitutes one of the most important competences to be acquired during the course.

The internet should be presented to the participants of the course in a broad and fair way. The virtual world is not a utopia, but hardly is it a dystopia, either. The teacher must, therefore, introduce the participants of the course to the advantages as well as the disadvantages. It is necessary to discuss the risks, however, and it must be made sure that the possibilities of avoiding them and solving the problems, if need be, are mentioned as well. One should not instil fear of using the internet in the participants of the course; yet, they must also be taught to pay attention to the issues of safety on the web. Most of all, the students must be reminded of the necessity to act consciously – internet users need to be able to predict the result of the steps that they make. The participants of the course must be aware of the fact that one cannot click on everything that one finds interesting. Through practice, guidelines of the instructor and the unavoidable mistakes made during the first stage of using the internet they will learn to distinguish the actual content of a website from the irrelevant active advertisements. Even though while accessing popular Polish websites one may encounter advertisements that only slow down the work,

accessing more specialised websites may lead to encountering those that open in the full-screen mode as well as malware (e.g. diallers connected with pornographic websites or advanced spyware). One must be careful when accessing linked content, especially on unfamiliar websites. Because of similar reasons the participants of the course must be made aware of the problem of spam. It may also contain malware. That is why it is crucial that the characteristic features of spam are discussed, i.e. the unfamiliar or strange sender address, suspicious subjects of the email, foreign language content. It is necessary to warn the participants of the course against opening the attachments to emails of unknown origin. Making conscious steps on the Web is connected with learning to avoid the websites with content that one may find offensive. All websites with pornographic, extremist, and vulgar content should be included in this category. The ability to recognise such websites depends mostly on getting accustomed to using the Web; nevertheless, there are some guidelines that the participants of the course can be provided with, such as – to read the address of the website or its short description on the search list carefully before accessing it. Some words and expressions whose semantic field when typed in a web search engine becomes quite distinct from the everyday one. The expression "pussy" may serve as an example of a word that if typed in a web search engine does not necessarily result in finding image files or information related to pussy cats. The "risky words" category includes mostly expressions from the English language – *pet, bunny, dirty, red, pink, nasty, naughty*, etc. That does not mean that these words are forbidden when using web search engines; one must, however, be careful and pay close attention to the Web search results.

The last of the problems related to internet security issues is privacy. The participants of the course should be reminded that email or bank account passwords resemble keys to the house and they may never be shared with anyone; if need be, they can be told to the people that one trusts the most. The issue of publishing personal information on the web is quite complex. The participants of the course need to learn to differentiate between the situations when providing true personal information (e.g. when starting a bank or an online auction website account) and those when this not obligatory (e.g. the filling in the forms when starting a free email account). It is essential that the seniors are aware of the need to be extra careful when posting information related to their private lives on internet forums, in chat rooms or social networking services. The participants of the course need to be aware that the information that they publish may be used against them, e.g. in money fraud attempts. It is necessary to mention that in these cases the security measures are quite similar to those in everyday life. One should not be too outspoken about their personal lives details when having a conversation in a crowded public place (and the social networking services can be compared to such a location). Attempts at fraud or extortion are common especially in real life - one may recall the "na wnuczka" ("the grandson") method<sup>5</sup>).

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<sup>5</sup> Criminals pretending to be friends of seniors' grandchildren in need of a money loan (translator's note).

The factor that is of crucial importance to the successfulness of the learning process is the participants' positive attitude towards the skills that they are acquiring. To encourage motivation to discover the Web the information should be provided that thanks to the internet one is able to:

- access websites,
- send files,
- use email,
- join internet forums,
- use instant messengers (e.g. Gadu-Gadu, Skype),
- listen to the radio on the net,
- shop online,
- participate in online auctions,
- play browser games,
- use online banking.

One must also remember the risks connected with using the internet:

- computer viruses,
- spam,
- pornography,
- explicit language,
- extremist content,
- fraud.

It must be emphasised, however, that when following some basic security rules and using the information available on the Web in a conscious way the risks can be avoided and explicit content is a price that has to be paid for the opportunity to benefit from the use of so universal a medium. The teacher should be prepared to provide more detailed information on the subject of the advantages and the disadvantages of using the internet. It is necessary to devote a little time to answering the questions of the participants of the course at the moment they are raised, rather than ignore them or cut them short, while at the same time making it clear that most of these issues are to be discussed further in the course.

According to L. Tuross, adult education is a process that presents a greater number of difficulties than education of younger people – modifying, unlearning, elimination of old opinions and habits is always more problematic than shaping new ones, for it requires the rejection of stereotypes in thinking and acting<sup>6)</sup>. In the case of internet skills training we do not usually have to deal with bad habits connected with using internet browsers or email. However, we might encounter some stereotypes impeding the acquisition process – to overcome these we must calmly provide comprehensive explanations.

Having discussed the basic theoretical problems we can move on to running and using internet browsers. The teacher should make sure that the necessary

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<sup>6)</sup> L. Tuross, *Andragogika. Zarys teorii oświaty i wychowania dorosłych*, Warszawa 1975, p. 26.

applications are installed on all the computers and to make himself familiar with the browser that is to be used in class. The seniors participating in the course are curious about the information that is being taught and they always ask many questions, so it is best to be prepared to explain why a particular internet browser is used (a results of recent surveys of the popularity of internet browsers may be useful) or what the specific components of a domain name are. It is necessary to be prepared for a quick discussion of the problems and controversies related to copyrights connected with sharing files on the Web. The questions are often raised while using freeware and the instructor has to explain in what ways it is different from commercial software. It is good to mention the beerware-type licenses to show the participants that the virtual reality is not as disconnected from the "real" world as it may seem and one might encounter some fairly sophisticated humour therein.

At the very first stage of using the internet the attention must be drawn to precise copying of Web addresses. It is worthwhile to teach the shortcuts available when browsing the Web and present the browser history and bookmarks to the participants. I also believe that it is better to choose the more difficult way to teach the participants of the course to use the browser bookmarks at the beginning and to teach them to work in many windows simultaneously, which might initially lead to confusion, but makes further tasks easier. The choice of a browser is up to the instructor, of course; it is best, however, to choose one of the more functional ones of those that are popular in Poland. One must also bear in mind that functionality means something different to a beginner and to a proficient internet user. The option of being able to work with numerous bookmarks at once is initially hard to understand and it is a skill that is hard to acquire, which will only be useful in the future. The option to enlarge the image, in turn, is enormously important and practical for seniors. Internet browsers with integral Web search engine windows should be avoided. For people who will have the first chance ever to enter a Web address and who do not yet know how to search for information on the internet such an option might constitute too advanced a convenience.

Developing awareness of actions and their consequences is an essential element of internet skills training for seniors. The participants of the course need to be made conscious of the fact that they actively browse the internet (with the support of an instructor, of course) and what happens on the computer screen depends on them. It is crucial, therefore, to demonstrate the connections between certain actions and certain results. The way of thinking in which the participants of the course are detached from the consequences of their actions and the events observed on the computer screen are perceived as independent from the particular users needs to be unlearned. Perceiving the virtual reality as part of the "something happened" category must be unlearned to move on to the "I did something" category. The participants of the course should never say or think "the window disappeared", "something popped up", "I was rejected"; instead, these need to turn into "I closed/minimised a window", "I opened a another website in a new window", "I followed



a link in a new window, the previous window with the previous website is still open and I can return to it”, “I logged out of my email account”.

Teaching the participants of the course to start their own email accounts is an important task; it is also time-consuming. First and foremost, the instructor needs to provide a clear explanation of what exactly a “login” and a “password” are. It is necessary for the teacher to make sure that all the participants put down the login and the password that they have chosen. Emphasis must be put on the fact that all the details of the login and the password – upper and lower case letters, spaces, punctuation marks – are relevant. It is important to make sure that the participants understand which of the logins and passwords were accepted by the system and that the correct login and password are put down on a piece of paper. The teacher must bear in mind that most probably some of the participants will not be able to start an email account on a particular server, regardless of the reasons. The fact that during the following class it might turn out that some of the people have forgotten the login or the password and it will be necessary to start a new account must be taken into consideration.

Having learned to send regular emails it is worthwhile that the participants of the course are taught to send e-cards. It is not a very difficult task and it will certainly allow the students to get accustomed to sending email and to learn to enter correct email addresses and to closely observe what is going on the computer screen. It all makes it easier to move on to the further, much more advanced task – sending and receiving emails with attachments. In this case it is necessary to go over the procedure a few times and take time to practice. It is important that the participants of the course are sure of what they want to send and where it is exactly before beginning the task. Before the start of the procedure it is worthwhile to do a revision of the basic information related to saving files and finding them in particular folders. (At this point it might turn out that a detailed revision is necessary.) The basic rules of using an email account – such as deleting spam, not opening suspicious messages or emptying trash – must be taught and practiced from the very beginning.

Introducing the methods of making an effective use of various web search engines while accessing information on the Web to the participants of the course is essential. It is a part of the course that participants have a very positive attitude about. The seniors particularly enjoy searching for image files. It is best not to hurry at this point to give everyone time to test the various search options feely. This is a good moment to check the practical skills of using the “click to go back” and “click to go forward” options and working in a number of windows and bookmarks at the same time. Of course, finding a particular piece of information (e.g. train schedule, a recipe or a location) is an exercise of crucial importance. It is best to start the exercise with putting that which is to be found and how to “translate” it into an expression to be typed in the Web search engine down on a piece of paper. Some of the participants of the course have a tendency to type entire sentences in the Web search engine, so restricting to expressions consisting of a few words only needs to be practiced.

Having introduced the participants to these basic subjects and skills it is necessary for the teacher to devote some time to addressing any doubts that may arise as well as correcting the mistakes that are made repeatedly. This constitutes a reliable basis for moving on to the final stage of learning – self-education. The teacher must remember about the moment of the end of the course and be aware of the fact that the participants will finally be able to independently undertake further tasks in the virtual world. The instructor is to help to overcome barriers and to acquire elementary competences. One must take into consideration what self-education is; J. Pólturzycki proposes that it is a process of learning, conducted with awareness of the opportunity to receive various forms of help from individuals and institutions. It is a process of independent learning, with the aims, content, forms, sources and methods chosen and established by the learner<sup>7)</sup>. In the case of using the internet the institution that may provide help for the participants of the course is the internet itself. That is why it is essential that they are able to find and use the information that they need.

In the course of the work with the seniors during the computer skills training course the teacher meets people at various education levels and diverse life experiences. Among the participants of the course one may find those who have spent all their lives managing the household as well as those who have been professionally active for a long time. Some have finished their organised education at an early stage; some, however, may turn out to be retired lecturers or scientists. Therefore, when the teacher refers to the participants' experiences when explaining the introduced information he should not look for a common ground. Using a number of diverse metaphors and analogies to allow the participants of the course to choose the ones that they find the most meaningful is a much better method.

The use of metaphor is particularly profitable when having to address the doubt that is common among the participants – „are the competences that we are acquiring really practical?”. It is required of the teacher to make sure that nothing of what was learned goes to waste. Elementary skills remain just as useful regardless of which internet browser we use or on which server our email accounts are located. The metaphor of a kitchen or a bathroom is helpful here; these rooms are quite distinct in each particular household, yet in every one of them similar elements can be found, and they allow one to prepare dinner or have a shower.

While addressing the advanced issues connected with using the internet during the computer skills training course the senior voluntary workers – experienced computer users – provided great help in conducting the classes<sup>8)</sup>. At this stage the individual differences in how fast one is able to acquire information and the deficiencies in the formerly learned skills become clearly manifest. In such cases

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<sup>7)</sup> J. Pólturzycki, *Wdrażanie do samokształcenia*, Warszawa 1983, p. 14.

<sup>8)</sup> Senior voluntary workers took part in the computer skills training classes organised as part of the @ktywny Senior project.

the voluntary workers can support an individual student in overcoming difficulties, which is extremely helpful from the perspective of working with the whole group.

At the end of the present article I would like to share a conclusion that might at first seem fairly obvious; it is, however, of great importance – the teacher must first and foremost be flexible, not only during the advanced stage of the course. The curriculum ought to be subject to ongoing revision and adjustment to the progress made by individual participants. There is no point in introducing new subjects if the information is not discussed in detail, understood and acquired. It is better to slow down and do less than we have originally intended than to implement the curriculum without anyone actually learning anything.

Entering the new, unknown world of the Web presents a challenge for the participants of the course as well as for the teachers. It is a task that both sides have to face, with commitment and mutual trust in the competences of both the students and the instructors mandatory. Success in this sphere will not be achieved easily – arduous work and having to face numerous difficulties that have to be solved with combined effort are to be expected. The effort, however, will certainly be fruitful and become a source of great satisfaction of the beginner internet users as well as the instructors-guides. Using the internet is not just another skill making everyday life easier – it also can become an enjoyable adventure. It is worthwhile to suggest this thought to the participants of the course.

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