

The joy of Lifelong Learning

First of all I want to thank the organization of SERVUS for the opportunity to speak about servant leadership across generations. The subject of servant leadership was quite new to me, and gave me the opportunity to think about this double concept of leading and serving. But the theme 'Across Generations' is a familiar one for me.

I am the director of HOVO Amsterdam, a department within the Free University that offers short courses of 3 till 10 weeks on an academic level in the field of liberal arts for people of 50 years and older. Subjects are for instance the history of art, modern architecture, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, the Higgs particle, the history of the Netherlands, Japanese culture, the concept of freedom in Europe and many more. The program changes every three months, although some courses will return.

HOVO Amsterdam serves over 2000 people each semester, summing up to more than 5000 subscriptions on a yearly basis. Our teachers are professors of the Free University or other universities, but also professional freelance teachers who specialize in this kind of education. Our students are mainly highly educated people with a broad interest in knowledge on an academic level. They don't have to take exams, but in many courses there is a possibility to write an essay to complete the course. HOVO Amsterdam is not the only institution for higher education for seniors; many universities and colleges in the Netherlands have a department like this, and on a yearly basis there are approximately 25.000 subscriptions.

I want to explore the ideas on servant leadership in the context of 'lifelong learning', more specifically in the context of the University of the Third Age, and I will conclude with some concrete examples illustrating the theme 'across generations'. But first I will concentrate on a more basic question:

"Why would old people want to learn?"

It is a question that people sometimes ask me. Why would you study for other reasons than professional education? And why attend university after retirement? The answer is simple: because learning is a joy in itself. And the joy of learning shows most clearly when we take a look at children. Look at their attitude towards knowledge: they want to know everything! : why is the moon yellow, how long ago did the dinosaurs die, what was the Second World War about, what is the story of the Greek Gods, why do people die and what is fair or not fair? Knowledge is like nectar of the gods for them: it gives meaning to an otherwise confusing world, and they intuitively know that knowledge is useful for survival. And the same counts for seniors, and I would even say, that it should be like this for everyone. Seniors ask the same questions, but from a developed perspective. They have lived half a century longer, and have a general background knowledge that exceeds the knowledge of children, from personal life experience, school knowledge, professional knowledge and reading newspapers for several decades.

But the basic attitude is the same: both children and seniors open their eyes to the world and want to know more about it. In a philosophical sense this relates to the subject of *scholae* as formulated by Aristotle in the 4th century BC. In the word *scholae* we recognize the modern word *school*. But the word school in the course of the centuries has developed into a word for the obligatory education for children and even for the building in which children get their education, whereas in the original sense *scholae* refers to *development*. And development is not a neutral subject, it was supposed to lead to self improvement and self development. Knowledge gives you tools to cope with the world, other people and yourself.

Here we come close to the power of the servant, as is mentioned in book of Robert Greenleaf: **to create the opportunity and alternatives so that individuals may choose and build autonomy**. That is exactly what HOVO tries to do, what the broader aim is when we think about the program. HOVO tries to create opportunities so that students may choose and build autonomy.

This is a good thing for **society as a whole**, as the number of seniors will increase the coming decades, and on a more **personal level**: research has shown that people who study on a regular basis report more happiness in their daily lives.

So how does the concept of **servant leadership** come in?

Servant leadership has two poles: servant and leadership.

1) On the most basic level this is what every company should do, and which means that you should treat your customers like a king. We don't force students to choose HOVO, so we have to serve them well, with an interesting program and good service.

2) But HOVO also leads. And then, the question is: what is an interesting program and is this program related to a broader goal? HOVO tries to educate people in a very general sense to build autonomy and to develop themselves. This means that the subjects HOVO offers are related to this broader goal and that, while leading, HOVO has this broader goal in mind, perhaps even the ultimate goal of contributing to the happiness, health and autonomy for seniors, within the framework of academic courses.

And of course, the two of them come together in the choices of the students: HOVO can only lead in this way if students choose these courses – not only introductions in art history, but also more specific subjects like quantum theory, the United Nations or a 16th century philosopher. HOVO leads and serves. It is interesting to have in mind the book *Journey to the East* of Herman Hesse: a story about a person who joins a group with a secret goal. They are travelling towards the east. One of the group members is doing small jobs, carrying things for the other group members and acts like a servant. But when he unexpectedly leaves the group, the whole group falls apart. The main character tries to find this man and after decades he succeeds. The supposed servant turns out to be the actual leader of the whole movement. While the book concentrates on the main character, who is lost, it is also interesting to focus on the leader: as soon as he leaves, he cannot lead these people anymore. And the same counts for HOVO: if students don't subscribe, HOVO cannot lead!

So, to conclude this small exploration, the students enable HOVO to put subjects in the program that – I think – are also good for their development (*scholae*)! HOVO is both leading and serving, and also our students are leading and serving.

Intergenerational perspectives

I want to conclude by giving you some concrete examples on the intergenerational perspective, just to show you some of the possible forms in which the theme 'across generations' can take place. I focus mainly on how the seniors influence the younger generations, because sometimes it seems that the grey ones are looked down on. Of course there's also an influence the other way around.

At the start of my lecture I talked about the shared interests of children and seniors. In the prime time of our lives we seem to forget about the joy of learning for its own sake - most people in that age are too busy with building a family, home and career.

In Rotterdam they took up this shared interest with a very nice initiative: the **HOVO children university**, an initiative of HOVO Rotterdam. During the summer period short courses were offered for grandchildren and their grandparents. Subjects were for instance dinosaurs, Greek mythology and great numbers. A real intergenerational learning, much to the surprise of regular students, who saw children and "elderly" people eating in the university restaurant...

From this shared interest, educating the older students may lead in the long run to study choices of their grandchildren in later life, not only in the setting of the HOVO children university, but also when grandmother talks to her grandchild about an interesting course that she follows. They might learn about the existence of subjects that otherwise they had never known they existed, like paleontology or genetics instead of more common subjects like law or communication studies.

Another initiative of HOVO Rotterdam is a workshop in which **regular students helped the senior students** in a history project on Rotterdam, resulting in a blog on the cultural history of Rotterdam.

Here at the Free University regular students stand shoulder to shoulder in the **elevator** here in the building, wondering what all these “old people” are doing at the university. I think there is a lot of prejudice against seniors – in Holland we have the expression ‘sitting behind the geraniums’. It’s good that seniors show by their behavior – visiting the university – that this is not the reality anymore and that is neither the horrible future perspective for young people. When you grow older life goes on and can become enriched by activities like this. Many people talk about seniors like they are a different species, a gap HOVO likes to bridge: we are all people, only of a different age.

Teaching and learning - For the **younger teachers** the senior audience may come as a very pleasant surprise. Behind the grey hair and bold heads are intelligent, smart people with a lot of background knowledge. Talking for myself, I have learnt a lot from my students, and I want to conclude with two insights that might also serve you – speaking as a bit older person to a younger audience. One thing is that they showed me (not told me!) that character building is important: I see that psychological traits deepen – people become milder or grumpier when they grow into them for half a century. Some react with a smile, others with suspect when something goes wrong. I see how they create a nice or a hostile world for themselves just because of their own reaction patterns. They taught me that old age can come with a lot of pleasure, but also that health is the weak point of life, the Achilles heel, so I learned it’s important to treat your body well. I learned lots of other things, but time is too short.

If you want to know more, you can ask me or send me an e-mail at c.d.van.bergen@vu.nl, or visit our website www.hovoamsterdam.nl - only in Dutch though. I hope that you, with your knowledge of servant leadership, can translate some of the things I said about the joy of lifelong learning into this perspective yourself. Thank you for your attention.