

University of Aveiro (PT), 05-07 June 2019

University Lifelong Learning to Live a Better Life – Continuing Education for Sustainable Quality of Life in Europe

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Lifelong Learners: Essential Contributors to the Higher Education Living and Learning Community

The project is an exploratory study of lifelong learners and their contribution within a diverse learning community engaged in experiential learning while sailing across the globe. This higher education organization consists of a unique learning environment in which a diverse student population, comprised of students of all ages, live and learn alongside faculty, staff, and administration. This shipboard community is engaged in a joint enterprise designed to integrate education with exposure to a variety of cultures, people, and experiences. One subset of the academic community includes lifelong learners who are thirty years and up and sail and learn alongside the rest of the shipboard community. These individuals bring generational diversity and professional expertise to the learning community, including the other students, “ship kids” and undergraduates, on board the voyage.

A community of learners requires that a group of students be “engaged in intellectual interaction.” (Cross 1998, p. 4). These three elements (i.e. engagement, intellectuality, and interaction) can be mapped into the three key elements of a community of inquiry – social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). At this high functioning level of community, students not only feel welcome, comfortable, and connected, but they engage each other in rigorous discourse and dialogue, they are motivated and encouraged through professional guidance, and they build camaraderie through participation in casual, or non-formal, social interactions. (Brown, 2001).

The experience creates a support system for all participants and promotes learning through collaboration and the exchange of ideas, experiences, and expertise. The lifelong learners come to this educational environment with diverse and disproportionate prior experience (Long, 2004). These students are required to balance a variety of roles: student, family member, and employee, making student not their primary appointment (Flannery & Apps, 1987). Yet, participation by adults in formal higher education continues to escalate (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010).