Study Summary

Older adults embrace design thinking: A feasibility study on blended learning formats

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What this study asked

The study examined how older adults experience learning **design thinking** through a blended course format. Design thinking is an innovation method that helps teams understand users, generate ideas, and test simple prototypes. The study explored the learning experiences of the participants, the skills they acquired, how they applied these skills to real-life projects, and what they needed in terms of individualization and improvements to the learning format.

Who took part

Five older learners (ages 60–66; average age 64; one woman) joined a 3-month pilot course. One person left after the first third. Participants had diverse professional backgrounds and were comfortable with everyday digital tools.

What the course looked like

- **Structure:** Three modules (User Discovery & Need Finding; Problem-Solving & Idea Evaluation; Prototyping & Experimentation).
- **Format:** Asynchronous e-learning for theory, plus online meetings and added **on-site** sessions for group work on real projects.
- **Projects:** Teams chose topics meaningful to them (e.g., a podcast for older adults; a guide for local politicians on early childhood support; making Lucerne more student-friendly).

How the research was done

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews **before**, **during**, and **after** the course to capture motivations, experiences, challenges, and perceived outcomes. The interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

What participants said

- **Learning experience:** The step-by-step approach helped; people liked seeing how the full process fits together and valued the “learning by doing” cycle.

- **Format preferences:** Online modules were useful for learning concepts; **in-person** sessions felt better for applying tools (e.g., interviews, brainstorming, prototyping) and collaborating.
- **Motivation:** Working on personally relevant, real-life projects increased engagement; many aimed for social impact.

Challenges to note

- **Time pressure:** The 3-month timeline felt tight for some.
- **Language:** English-language e-learning was demanding for a few participants.
- **Support needs:** Participants asked for more individualized coaching and clearer guidance on tools (e.g., collaboration platforms).

What changed in practice

Despite constraints, most participants reported applying design-thinking steps (interviews, ideation, small tests) in their projects. Two initiatives achieved concrete follow-ups (e.g., a podcast launch; a local budget allocation for early childhood support). These are early outcomes and were not evaluated with quantitative measures.

What this means

- Offering older adults a **blended** learning format (online for theory, in-person for practice) appears **feasible** and acceptable for learning innovation methods.
- Programs may benefit from **tailored feedback**, flexible pacing, and clear tool support.
- Learning aimed at **real projects** can support motivation and potential community impact, but larger studies are needed to assess broader effects.

Limitations (why to be cautious)

This was a small study group (N = 5, mostly highly educated and tech-savvy; one female). Results may not be generalized. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples and more objective outcomes (e.g., completion rates, knowledge tests).

Who was involved

The study was conducted by the University of Zurich Healthy Longevity Center and ZHAW School of Management and Law, with course access provided by SparkAdemy AG. Funding came from DIZH (Digitalization Initiative of the Zurich Higher Education Institutions). The article is Open Access (CC BY).

(Summarized by Kathrin Inerle, August 2025)