Specifics of Adult Continuing Education

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Abstract

The paper presents some issues of continuing education in view of current needs of sustainable human development. Each learner brings his/her own unique learning characteristics to learning situations. Teaching process and guiding of learning process must recognise and reflect these characteristics in order to make teaching/learning instructions effective. Adults as learners display different features from those of common undergraduate students. The authors deal with principles of good educational practice, with the determined specific features of adult learners and with various types of continuing education programmes.

Continuing Education - Consequence of Sustainable Human Development Requirement

Living in an information age we must think of education as an industry. We may call it a *knowledge industry*. Knowledge has become a power, a determinative element of competitiveness. The growing clamour and move to revolutionise the educational sector with the aid of computer technology is clearly a part of an overall desire to be globally competitive. To qualify for global competition, it has been suggested that human power must be sustainably developed. Human development has been defined as the process of widening people's choice and the level of well-being they achieve. An inseparable part of this process is to ensure permanent opportunities to acquire knew knowledge and to have access to adequate information resources. Here we can distinguish between *two sides of human development*: between the formation of human capabilities and human potential development, and the use that people make of their acquired capabilities and developed potentials.

There is no doubt that changes in the industry structure, and economy and business organisation have called for greater personal investment in education. Skilled jobs have increased, job functions have diversified and the needs of labour market have changed. Many aspects of our social, cultural, natural, etc. environment are changing from day to day. The motors of this dynamics are the globalisation of communication and information processing technologies, and the globalisation of industry, business and trade. People are faced with the need to retrain themselves, as existing workforces, to ensure that their skills are relevant and meet the needs of the current technological, cultural and social changes. In contradiction to the needs of the past a cyclical retraining becomes now-a-days non-sufficient and there has arisen a need for *permanent further education possibilities*, so-called *continuing education*.

Various emerging information and computer technologies dramatically expand options for opening up a space that support the development of full human potential by challenging the rigidity and conservativeness of traditional schooling as well as by empowering learners to be engaged in diverse processes of learning. These technologies force us to rethink our education systems, giving more attention to adult learning, reshaping preparation of young people for adult life, stressing the autonomy of a learner, shifting the focus of the systems and processes from teaching to learning, and redefining the ways in which people get access to information and knowledge. The new information and computer technologies raise quite new questions about how knowledge is created and who owns it. Educational institutions, schools and universities, which used to have control over knowledge and over its dissemination now find themselves in mediatised environments where schooling is simply one of many different cultural experiences.

A previous objective of education was to produce individuals who knew a lot, and, if possible, to produce specialists who knew very much about something particular. It was assumed that the more one knew the better he or she would be to deal with the practical problems of the real life. Education was traditionally conceived as a fairly one-way street where knowledge travelled from a teacher and textbooks to students who tried to memorise all they could remember. Students were expected to store information in their mind, but not necessarily to use their mind to process the information. The technological advances that characterise our current age have changed everything and we have to reconstruct the cognitive map of education. To remember information and systematically repeat skills has been not enough in current epoch. The world no longer needs human databases or robots, such people are dysfunctional in it. It needs learners who can adapt their activities to what is happening each new day. *Learning to know* and *learning to do* must be replaced *by learning to become learning oriented*. Actually this is an orientation with which we are born - because learning is a never-ending experience taking place with different intensity from the cradle to the grave - but later we tend to lose it.

Continuing Education – Necessity to Ensure Diverse Learning Opportunities for Adults

Traditionally individuals have tended to begin and end their formal education within defined segments of education systems in their early years. Today ongoing movement calls for life-long learning and in its frame for continuing education. *Continuing education* is a broad concept which includes all of the learning opportunities all people want or need outside of basic education and primary education. It extends well beyond the completion of formal studies and into the less formal area of adult education. People involved in adult education undertake courses for many reasons. It may be for mental stimulation, personal growth, acquirement of new knowledge and skills, for social interaction and self confidence. Regardless of a person's reasons for studying, one thing is certain, continuing education makes a major contribution to the well being of society.

The various information and communication technologies present dynamic new opportunities to support the diversity of learners and learning processes. However, serious questions must be raised around the discourse and practice of new technologies and education. The information and communication technologies are conceived as alternative delivery mechanisms which facilitate mass broadcasting of information to learners in a low-cost way. Usually there is little concern about whether the learners actually understand these broadcasts. Oftentimes a mistaken assumption is that information is in a sense neutral and that all receivers will extract the same meaning and ideas that the creator intended. The challenge then that lies before us is to link the information and communication technologies and their applications to a new set of reference points around learning.

What was said in general about the necessity to form individuals capable of responding effectively to rapidly changing environments, and to educate *learners* instead of *knowers* is fully valid also for continuing education of adults. These two categories can be characterised by the following contradictory features:

Knower	*Learner*
❑ consults information of the past	❑ projects information into the future
❑ accumulates facts and concepts	❑ applies and experiences knowledge
❑ stores concepts without relating them	❑ creates and elaborates concepts nets
❑ applies knowledge to specific problems	❑ creates specific solutions for each problem
❑ modifies external stimuli to fit understanding	❑ modifies understanding to explain stimuli
❑ is passive, waits to be given information	❑ is proactive, eagerly seeks new experiences

In order to produce learners knowledge and skills must be seen as means through which one's capacities for learning are exercised and extended. And subject mastery should be viewed as an implicit consequence of the process, attained as a result of learning to become learning oriented. In this context it is very important mainly for adult learners that such a system should provide learning environments within which everybody could create his or her own learning ecology establishing personalised relationships with the aspects of his/her life and information background.

To meet all adults' needs and demands continuing education must offer a broad range of diverse learning opportunities, diverse in both kind and content, too. There can be distinguished *six types of continuing education programmes* (UNESCO APPEAL Programme, Kasaju, 1977):

1. *Post-literacy programmes.* Aim of these programmes is to maintain and enhance basic literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills, giving individuals sufficient basic working skills, and enabling them to function effectively in their societies. Their objectives are retention of already acquired literacy skills, improvement of existing literacy skills, and application of literacy skills for individual and community development.

2. *Equivalency programmes.* They are designed as alternative education programmes equivalent to existing formal, general or vocational education programmes. They share similarities with formal education programmes, but should be designed in a more flexible way.

3. *Income-generating programmes.* These programmes try to help their participants to acquire or upgrade vocational skills and enable them to conduct income-generating activities.

4. *Individual interest programmes.* Individual interest programmes provide opportunities for individuals to participate in and learn about their chosen interests. They are aimed at promoting and strengthening learning activities which promote leisure utilisation, life improvement and self-actualisation.

5. *Quality of life improvement programmes.* They aim to equip learners with essential knowledge, attitudes, values and skills to enable them to improve their quality of life as individuals as well as members of the community.

6. *Future oriented programmes.* This type of continuing education programmes offers people an opportunity to acquire new skills, knowledge and techniques, and to adapt themselves - and in this way also their organisations they come from - to growing social and structural changes, in particular to the rapid technological development.

Continuing Education – Learning Process Respecting Specifics of Adult Learners

Instructional designers creating continuing education programmes must be aware of the specific characteristics of adults as learners. Adults are often likely to display characteristics quite different from those of children (Knowles, 1973; Westmeyer, 1988). These particular characteristic features of adult learners can be designated by the following notions, as P. R. Ference and E. L. Vockell (1994) use them: skill-seeking, problem-centered, task-centered, life-centered, solution-driven, value-driven, externally motivated, internally motivated, active learners, hands-on, experts, experienced-based, independent, self-directing.

Skill-seeking. Adult learners often need to attain new or improved skills in order to better meet and solve work and real-life problems. To acquire these concrete skills they intentionally actively look for the adequate opportunities of further education.

Problem-centered. Adult learners prefer to deal with problems, which are meaningful and known for them, it means with such problems which they encounter or might encounter in their particular life situations.

Task-centered. Very important is to give adult learners tasks directed towards reaching some specific goals or solving particular problems, because it is typical for adult learners to be more active in performing just such kinds of tasks.

Life-centered. Adults are special learners with a great experience background, they are people used to be faced with different matters of everyday life. As a result, the adult learners tend to focus their attention on real-world situations, on solving real-world problems and on finding applications of newly gained knowledge and skills in the real-world and everyday life situations.

Solution-driven. As it was already mentioned adult learners operate actively in the real world and must deal with real-life problems. That is why they prefer to solve problems related to their environment, to solve tasks directed towards reaching either specific goals or solutions. It can be said that they very often actively seek out solutions to their concrete problems.

Value-driven. If the adult learners did not select directly the subject matter which they are supposed to deal with, it is very important just in case of adult learners to explain them why they should learn it so they know what benefit they can gain from the learning experience they are going to undertake. Given the rationale for learning something, they will often invest considerable energy into learning only recommended and not chosen by them topics.

Externally motivated. Adult learners usually come to continuing education programmes very highly externally motivated by such factors as better jobs, increased promotional opportunities, and higher salaries.

Internally motivated. Very often there are also strong internal motivation factors bringing adult learners to undertake and to use continuing education opportunities. Such factors of their internal motivation are e.g. self-esteem, recognition, confidence, career satisfaction, the overall quality of life.

Active – learners. Adult learners are usually willing to participate in the learning process. They come to the continuing education programmes usually highly motivated either internally or externally, or both internally and externally, too. Given the opportunity they prefer to be actively involved into the learning process.

Hands-on. As active learners adults appreciate learning by doing rather than learning by listening. That is why they should be offered opportunities to acquire skills and knowledge through concrete, hands-on experience.

Expert. Adult learners are people actively practising as experts in many different fields. Real-life experiences have contributed to their wide areas of expertise. These experiences are brought by them to the learning process and are influencing, many times only in a hidden unconscious way, their learning progress.

Experienced-based. This specific feature is connected with the previous one. Adult learners bring a wide variety of prior educational and life experiences to a new learning situation and either consciously or unconsciously they use them in many different occasions and ways.

Independent. For adult learners it is typical to be more self-reliant. Adult learners operating as independent individuals using previously gained knowledge, skills and work and life experiences tend to accomplish things for themselves. It is very common for them to rely on their own personal experiences and knowledge to seek answers to questions and to solve problems.

Self directing. Adult learners usually perceive themselves to be independent and responsible for their own activities. They have a need to be directly involved in planning and directing their learning activities. This feature used to be connected with some aspects of their motivation.

For creation of continuing education instructions there can be identified similar basic principles as are those for good educational practice (Wilson, 1997). These principles are as it follows:

- *Well-structured and effective learning only occurs when a connection is made between the learner's needs and the subject under study.*

This principle has much to do with learners' motivation and with gaining learners' attention. Adult learners used to be motivated to some extent forward before instruction begins. They often come to continuing education programmes with a clear concept of what they need to acquire and with a strong willingness to learn something new and also useful for them. If the content of a programme is unknown for them the adult learners want to know how the newly acquired knowledge and skills will benefit them. They value learning much more if they believe that the new skills or knowledge will improve the overall quality of their life. Many motivational theories suggest that individuals prefer activities involving an optimal level of challenge. This is a very important fact in adult education which instructional designers must deal with. They must very carefully consider an appropriate, not non-estimated, level of such a challenge. Motivation can also be used for gaining adult learners' attention. Learners must pay attention to what is being presented but adults are more likely to attend a presentation if they believe that the presentation will help them to solve a problem that they care about. Other possibilities are to utilise multiple senses, to arouse learners' curiosity and to use relevant real-life examples.

- *Humans only learn best if they are presented with meaningful materials based on the skills and knowledge already acquired and mastered. Poorly structured learning that ignores the background and knowledge of the learning group eventually leads to frustration and poor overall results.*

Making use of this principle is based on stimulating recall of prerequisite material. Adult learners bring to the continuing education a vast amount of real-life experience in addition to formal education. On the one hand they want to examine their own experiences and on the other hand they want to test the newly acquired concepts and skills against their existing experiences. It should also be clear how clear objectives are important for the adult learners. These objectives should be relevant to the real world and clearly state the end-results or benefits of learning.

- *Humans demand to be active during the learning process. They need to be engaged both mentally as well as physically with their learning.*

The adult learners are usually willing to take an active part in the learning process. To support them to be active it is very important to present them adequate stimulus material. Since adults tend to be problem-centered, skill-seeking, independent and active participants in the learning process, clarity and relevance are the key principles in presenting information to them. It is also very important to engage the adult learners in the tasks with a very strong necessity to attain a relevant goal. Life-centralisation of adults causes that they are willing to invest considerable time and energy in determining the benefits derived from learning and in trying to remove the consequences of not learning. Another aspect of this principle is adults' tendency to act independently. That is why continuing education should offer them as much freedom as possible, to allow them to work at their own pace and to adapt the instruction to their own goals and interests. Adults have a need to be directly involved in planning and directing their learning activities, and they want to accomplish things for themselves. They do not need to be dictated how they should learn the new skills. But on the other hand they need a learning guidance offering them hints and suggestions that require them to uncover an answer, solve a problem, or acquire a new skill.

- *Effective teaching and learning requires structured opportunities for repeated practice in a supporting environment where trust and constructive feedback is available to the learner.*

In a case of adult learners it is very important that the repeated practice promotes retention and transfer. They should be provided with mental tools and techniques for retaining and effectively using the newly acquired knowledge and skills, about their practical applications. They should be given ample opportunities to practice working on the problems connected with their work and everyday life, because for most of the adult learners their new skills will be used to address issues found in their workplaces or personal use.

- *Effective teaching and learning processes should be multi-sense ones. Humankind demands that all of our senses be included in any teaching and learning process.*

There are many individual differences among learners that interact strongly with kinds of teaching. These are called learning styles or strategies. These terms are used to describe identifiable individual approaches to learning situations and are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment J. M. Reid (1987) identifies six major style preferences generally studied: the first four are

preferences for visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and tactile styles of learning, and the last two are preferences for individual or group differences. The more senses are involved in learning the more effective is the learning process and the higher number of learners is addressed. However, adult learners are more likely prefer visual and tactile learning, as opposed to auditory learning which is favoured by undergraduate learners.

- *Feedback is seen as essential for the learner to ensure that the goals and objectives of a learning sequence are being achieved. Feedback needs to be honest, constructive and encouraging so that the learner is empowered to continue the process.*

Providing feedback is a critical step in the training process. The learners need to know whether the learning objectives have been met. For adult learners, this phase of the instruction is especially important. For most of them, the simple awareness that performance is on target is usually sufficient to maintain their motivation. It is better to give feedback frequently for small steps rather than large chunks of learning. The key concept is to let learners try out their knowledge and to debug errors before serious misconceptions arise. Learners who are highly motivated and actively involved can often respond almost constantly while learning.

For adult learners it is important to feel that they are effectively learning new skills. So they welcome questions through which they can confirm their progress.

- *Rewards need to be developed and negotiated with learners on a range of levels, from the immediate to the long term.*

To compare with providing feedback performance assessment is more formal. Moreover, the real true performance assessment of adult learners takes place in their workplaces or the home environments when the learners attempt to solve problems or reach personal goals. Nevertheless it should not be forgotten that unlike the educators who love education the students usually love what education can bring. And this can be applied also in the case of adult learners.

Literature

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