

Adult education from a psychological perspective

Kształcenie ustawiczne z perspektywy psychologicznej

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Abstract: In the modern world, civilizational progress has become an important justification for the need of lifelong learning. Transformations of technical, technological, scientific, cultural and social nature require constant adjustment, in which the education process plays a tremendous role. One cannot underestimate the fact that the current ability to adjust to ubiquitous transformations, innovations and requirements of the job market will also impact the socioeconomic situation of the future societies. The effectivity of adult learning is influenced by the variety of factors, amongst which psychological variables, including motivation, play a crucial role. This article presents the specificity of adult education, and its practical implications.

Streszczenie: Współcześnie szczególnym uzasadnieniem potrzeby uczenia się przez całe życie jest dokonujący się postęp. Przemiany cywilizacyjne natury technicznej, technologicznej, naukowej, kulturowej i społecznej wymagają bezustannego przystosowania się, w czym doniosłe znaczenie przypada procesowi edukacji. Nie do przecenienia jest fakt, iż od aktualnej umiejętności przystosowania się do wszechobecnych transformacji, innowacji i wymagań rynku pracy, zależała będzie także sytuacja społeczno - ekonomiczna przyszłych społeczeństw. Na efektywność uczenia się dorosłych wpływa bardzo wiele zmiennych, wśród których czynniki psychologiczne, w tym motywacja, odgrywają niezmiernie ważną rolę. Artykuł przedstawia specyfikę edukacji dorosłych i jej implikacje praktyczne.

Introduction

Adult and continuing education has for decades been growing in importance, mainly due to fast pace of transformations in almost all areas of human functioning. Factors of both social, organizational, personal, or economic nature have been conditioning various changes in the areas of private and professional life of individuals (Okrój 2009). Due to all those transformations, lifelong learning has become imperative in the community and at the workplace, as people recognize the need to continue renewing knowledge and skills, as well as shape their personality throughout life. This ability will have a huge impact on the socioeconomic situation of modern knowledge - based societies. Currently, being a professional requires continuous development and self perfecting which is a prerequisite for adaptation, flexibility, efficacy, and competitiveness in the labor market (Lubranska 2014). During the present decade, adult learning has undergone substantial changes and experienced enormous growth in scope and scale. The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning from 1997 defines adult education as “the entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society. Adult learning encompasses both formal and continuing education, non - formal learning and the spectrum of informal and incidental learning available in a multicultural learning society, where theory and practice-based approaches are recognized” (CONFINTEA 2001).

Adult Learning

Learning - simplified - means acquiring knowledge and skills, as well as applying them in order to solve problems. Therefore, the effectivity of learning should depend on efficiency of cognitive processes, such as memory, reasoning, or intelligence. Undoubtedly, while cognition plays an important role here, learning is not restricted to cognition exclusively. The key element influencing learning efficacy is hidden in emotions that impact both cognitive processes, and motivation (Neuroandragogika 2017).

Although the roots of andragogy reach 19th century, the most significant rules of adult learning have been described in the 80's, pointing out that the process differs significantly from child learning. The most important differences encompass:

- Special attitude towards learning, being a consequence of own decision to engage in education and greater appreciation for the effort associated;
- Existence of the learning base for new information and skills due to cumulating of life experiences;

- Ability and willingness to use education as a mean to overcome life obstacles, challenges and tasks;
- Possibility of having emotional disturbances associated with negative experiences from the former stages of education, and tensions resulting from undertaking a double role in adult education of both an independent adult, and a dependent student (Smith 1982).

It is assumed that adult learners are independent, self-efficient, goal-oriented, intrinsically motivated, practically oriented. They are willing to discover practical applications of the study material, and are actively tending to participate in the learning process. They usually have clear and precise expectations towards activities they participate in, and have already mastered their individual learning style through previous learning experience. Therefore, they continue it with certain intentions and needs. They may show defense mechanisms formed at the earlier stages, and struggle with fixed learning difficulties, for their learning patterns do not always prove efficient. The main factor that plays a crucial role in their readiness to learn is motivation. Adult learners show this readiness when they notice that new knowledge or skills may help them cope with encountered or expected tasks or problems in life. Also, the need and desire to gain respect from others often is of importance (Neuroandragogika 2017). Motivation, as a force driving people to fulfill their needs, is therefore one of the main factors characteristic of adult learning process. Simultaneously, it makes one of the most important determinants of its effectivity, for the lack or incorrect level of motivation usually results in difficulties or the lack of goal achievement.

Motivation of Adult Learners

Motivation is associated with the learner's approach towards surrounding reality, and refers to factors that activate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behavior. "Motives are the 'whys' of behavior - the needs or wants that drive behavior and explain what we do. We don't actually observe a motive; rather, we infer that one exists based on the behavior we observe" (Nevid, 2013). Motivation refers to all of the processes of initiation, direction and maintenance of physical and mental activities. It engages mental processes in a variety of ways, allowing the individual to make a choice and undertake an action directed at a planned outcome (Zimbardo et al., 2010). According to Reykowski (1997), in order for a motivational process to initiate, at least three prerequisites have to be met:

1. Existence of an unfulfilled need, together with realization of it;
2. Existence of something that can fulfill this need, has been noticed, and positively evaluated;
3. Existence of a person's belief that they are able to fulfill the need, and that the chances of success of future actions are higher than zero.

Motivational processes therefore act as regulators of a human behavior. For each individual, an optimal level of motivation towards learning exists; both too weak, and too strong motivation can negatively influence its effectivity. The latter mainly pertains to people with big aspirations, possibly accompanied by emotional tension interfering with the optimal functioning of cognitive processes. Typically, increase in motivation leads to increase in intensity and pace of undertaken actions, with better resistance to fatigue. This process has however a restricted character. According to what is known as *The Yerkes-Dodson laws*, performance increases with

physiological or mental arousal but only up to a point. When levels of arousal become too high, performance decreases. The second law also indicates the difficulty level of the task as a variable modifying the relationship between motivation and performance, thus stating that different tasks require different levels of arousal for optimal performance. In case of simple tasks, even very strong motivation does not impact performance, whereas performance of difficult ones might be decreased due to strong motivation (Gurba, Piechota, 2015).

Psychologists have proposed a variety of ways of thinking about motivation, including looking at whether it arises from outside or inside of the individual. While both types are important, it has been proven that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can have different effects on behaviors and goal pursuing. Extrinsic motivation occurs when individuals are motivated to perform a behavior or engage in an activity to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in an action because it is personally rewarding; essentially, performing an activity for its own sake rather than the desire for some external reward. Those two types can differ in effectivity at driving behavior. In adult education, it is the intrinsic motivation that is of value and should be promoted (Knowles 2009). Some studies have demonstrated that offering excessive external rewards for already internally rewarding behavior can lead to a reduction in intrinsic motivation, a phenomenon known as the over justification effect. An interesting view on motivation and its role in learning was presented by Munro (2003, 2017).

Table 1. Motives of learning, actions usually used, and learning outcomes

	Motives for learning	Learning actions usually used	Learning outcomes
Surface	To meet minimal criteria, hurdles or demands, pass an exam, meet hurdle	Actions that help reproduction of ideas learnt; memorizing, rote learning of ideas, noting details	Ideas retained short term, not owned or understood by learner limited application and transfer
Deep	Understand the ideas, know more, solve problems, satisfy curiosity, achieve satisfaction by achieving long-term goals	Actions that help understanding; taking ideas apart, exploring them as widely as possible, relating ideas to what is already known	Better understanding, commitment to the ideas, ability to teach ideas to others, know that learning is not finished, transfer and use ideas broadly

Achieving	Meet the expectations of others, reduce pressure imposed by others to feel valued Achieve excellence, high marks or grades, skills to play the game, climb through a system secure one's future	Memorize, act to reproduce in an organized way, outcomes valued by others, learn procedurally not take risks, conform, copy Actions that help understanding; linking ideas with existing knowledge using a range of resources and materials	Ideas retained short term, not owned by the person Structuring the learning in the most facilitative ways

Munro J. Motivating learning: Why do we learn?, <https://students.education.unimelb.edu.au/selage/pub/readings/psyexlearn/PELmotivation.pdf>

According to Munro (2017), most people have held each of these motives and used the strategies linked with them in different situations. It is generally believed that surface approaches are the least useful, and deep approach is preferable, leading to higher quality outcomes for adult learners. To help students shift from surface to deep approaches, learning conditions that encourage each approach should be taken into consideration. Adult learners are typically more likely to use memorizing and rote strategies over meaning - analysis ones when they perceive the learning environment as involving a heavy workload, with little self - control over the process. Similarly, more perceived freedom and good teaching is linked with a meaning orientation. What is worth mentioning, it is the student's perception of the situation rather than the actual situation that is linked with the selection of the approach to learning.

Practical Implications

In order to maximize the effectiveness of adult education, it is important to take into consideration that adult learning engagement is derived by personal motives and - therefore - adult learners are ready to, at least partially, take responsibility for their educational process (Smith 1982). Effective teaching approach should be based on the premise that adults learn through experience (Knowles 1972), with the learning environment organized in a way that allows a reflection upon their previous actions. It should also provide possibilities to exchange experiences amongst participants, offer freedom, allow a certain level of independence, and promote student initiative. Not only does such strategy enable the participants to achieve better learning outcomes, but also establish greater control over own learning process (Lubranska 2014). In order to address key adult learning requirements in teaching practice, the ideas described below could be of particular assistance:

- Creating a preliminary test in order to assess students' knowledge and skills before course commencement,

- Allowing the participants to take lead - to a certain extent - of the educational process,
- Incorporating activities and experiences that could trigger the process of changing the attitude of course participants,
- Setting the learning goals, and clearly defined learning outcomes,
- Using interactive methods allowing confrontation of own experiences with ones gained during learning,
- Creating and maintaining the atmosphere that encourages experience exchange based on mutual understanding and acceptance,
- Incorporating practical problems and real life examples in the course content,
- Eliminating excessive information,
- Appreciating students' work and their role.

As previously mentioned, intrinsic motivation plays a key role in adult education (Knowles 2009). Therefore, stimulating the need for self growth, and helping adult learners realize the profits that can be gained through education, can be of value. Intrinsic motivation can also be triggered by promoting student participation in creating a study program or setting its goals. Moreover, regardless if one of the motives of learning is the willingness to cope better with life problems, the didactic process should encompass examples of practical application of new knowledge and skills. Adult learners should always realize the usefulness of study material.

Conclusions

Specificity of adult education, labeled by a highly pragmatic approach towards learning, requires a certain attitude towards the learning process. Education providers should be aware that adults want to learn what they perceive necessary and helpful in overcoming obstacles and challenges of both personal and professional nature (Knowles 2009). The didactic process should therefore address the above. Correct approach to adult education can be of great assistance, thus allowing participants to adjust better to transforming reality.

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