

# Learning and Educational Process in Adult Education

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## Abstract

The educational needs of immigrants are influenced by the existing social context in which they develop and are the result of the lack of both knowledge and skills, as well as the adoption of appropriate attitudes and behaviors. This specific social group of learners, due to its educational deficiencies, needs to acquire knowledge that can be effectively utilized in ensuring better job prospects and therefore better living conditions. Job opportunities help in smooth integration and acceptance that contributes to the acquisition of a positive self-image . The trainer plays a special role by cultivating conditions of mutual trust, psychological support, continuous renegotiation of the program's goals, respect for the needs of the learners without prejudices but at the same time maintaining their cultural characteristics. This fact strengthens the positive attitude of the participants in the educational process and encourages their active participation in it. Furthermore, vulnerable groups of adult learners, through respect for their particular value system and the strengthening of their self-confidence, are encouraged to review behaviors and attitudes when they become dysfunctional in their attempt to respond to the changes occurring both in their personal lives and in the broader social environment.

**Keywords:** Educational Process, Adult Education, Adult Learners

### **Characteristics of Adult Learners**

According to the UNESCO definition , the field of Adult Education includes any planned learning activity regardless of its level or whether it is of a general, technical or vocational nature ( Rogers , C. , 2002, Kokkos, A.,2005). The educational activities that fall under Adult Education are distinguished in the following categories ( Vergidis , D. & Karalis, Th. 2004): supplementary education, vocational education, education in social issues, education for political and social life and for personal development. A person is recognized as an adult when, regardless of his age, he has achieved a level of maturity and is able to assume responsibility for himself, including financial obligations, and perhaps for third parties ( Hiemstra , R. , 1991). Specifically, the theory of Andragogy points out that an adult is distinguished by the following parameters (Kokkos, A. , 2005):

- ❖ He needs to know why he needs to learn something and what exactly the knowledge or skills he will acquire will be useful for. Adult learners accept to participate in an educational program when it meets their needs and is consistent with personal goals, which have to do with their professional or social life.
- ❖ He needs to be treated by educators as capable of self-directed learning. Adult learners want to be actively involved in the learning process. At the same time, however, they can activate strong defense mechanisms and give up on learning. This depends to a large extent on the educator's attitude towards them.
- ❖ He needs to utilize his existing experiences as a source of learning. Adult learners bring with them crystallized ways of learning, with the help of which they try to approach knowledge. By engaging in educational programs, they control and renew these learning ways. Furthermore, according to (Kokkos, A. & Lionarakis , A. , 1998; Merriam , S. & Caffarella , R. , 1999 ; Rogers , C. , 1999, 2002; Forreire , P. 1977, 2004):

- Adults abstain or move away from education when they feel they are wasting their time.
- They are only interested in education as a side job.
- They come to education motivated by an external motivation (e.g. professional development, finding a job) or an internal motivation (e.g. rehabilitating past negative experiences)
- They come to education for personal reasons that they don't always reveal.
- They come to education to create social relationships.
- They have obligations that do not allow them to engage in their learning tasks for a long period of time.
- Adult learners seek the instructor's interest as well as confirmation that they can succeed.
- Adult learners need the reward and encouragement of educators.
- They come to education with certain goals and desire to achieve them.
- They have diverse experiences which they share with the rest of the educational team.

According to Mezirow ( op . cit. in Kokkos, A. , 2010) when adults realize that their system of mental habits has become problematic due to distorted or incomplete assumptions, they can be led to reconsider these predispositions on the basis of which they interpret reality. Transformative learning is a process in which “ *we transform problematic frames of reference (mental habits, perspectives, mental sets) – sets of beliefs and expectations – so that they become more inclusive, multifaceted, open, reflective and emotionally ready for change* ”. According to Kokkos, A., (2011) the transformative learning movement argues that the purpose of adult education is not to equip learners with knowledge, skills and attitudes that reproduce the dominant values of society, but to engage them in a process of critical reflection that makes them more emancipated against the dominant ideology, questioning

assumptions that have been embraced in early stages and which they tend to take for granted (Kokkos, A., 2011) The ultimate goal and main purpose of adult education is to help people realize their potential, to become more emancipated, socially responsible and self-reliant learners, that is, to be led to more conscious choices by thinking more critically. ( Mezirow , J. ,1998, 2007). According to Rogers (1999), despite the wide range of differences among adults, the basic elements that characterize them are the following:

- They are by definition adults and are in an ongoing process of development.
- They possess a set of experiences, perceptions and values.
- They come to education with given intentions, expectations and goals.
- They have competing interests.
- They have established learning models.

In conclusion, we can say that what mainly characterizes a group of adult learners is diversity. Adult learners are people with different experiences, as well as with significant cultural, ideological and individual differences. Each has their own identity and has understood their role and place within the broader social context. All these factors constitute a prism through which each is connected both to the educational program and to the trainer from which each will bring their own advantages and disadvantages to the learning situation. For the successful outcome of a program and ensuring the active participation of the learners in it, it is necessary for the trainer to know and take into account the special characteristics of each group that he is called upon to train.

### **Adult Learning Theories**

The international literature presents several different approaches to the study of the phenomenon of learning and the way in which it is most effectively carried out. Merriam and Caffarella in their classic work *Learning in Adulthood* (1991) distinguish learning theories

into four types: behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, and social learning theories, a categorization that Alan also agrees with. Rogers (1999).

We will briefly look at the work of key scholars, who have either dealt purely with adult education ( Knowles , Jarvis , Mezirow , Alan Rogers , Freire ), or their work concerns in a way that has become an important point of reference in the relevant international bibliography ( Dewey , Kolb , Carl Rogers ).

The theory of andragogy belongs to the humanistic approaches to adult education. Malcolm Knowles is considered the father of this theory (without having invented the term himself), which he defines as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (1980). Therefore, andragogy aspires to be a theory for adult education that leads to specific methods and practices (Kokkos, A., 2005).

The theory is based on six assumptions, which differentiate andragogy from pedagogy ( Jarvis , P. , 2004, Kokkos, A.,2005). These are the following:

1. Adults have the ability to self-determine and, at the same time, have a psychological need to be treated with respect.
2. The experience with which adults enter the educational process is an extremely rich resource, which must be utilized in the context of experiential education.
3. Adults are characterized by a readiness to learn, as they want to acquire knowledge relevant to the conditions they face, so that they can act more effectively.
4. The focus of their learning orientations is the "problem" and not the acquisition of abstract, academic knowledge.
5. Intrinsic learning motivations (job satisfaction, self-esteem, etc.) appear to adults to be more important than extrinsic ones (promotion, better salary, etc.).
6. Adults need to realize the usefulness of what they are learning, that is, to know why they need to learn something before engaging in the process of learning it.

When these assumptions are taken into account at all stages of implementing an adult education program, from planning to evaluation, they lead to a series of educational practices that concern the creation of an appropriate learning climate characterized by freedom of expression, breadth of inquiry, friendliness and mutual respect between teachers and students.

The needs of the learners constitute the basis on which the educational program is built. Learners do not function as passive recipients of predetermined choices, but actively participate in the educational process. The trainer abandons the traditional role of the lecturer and functions as an animator, through the use of appropriate educational methods, which promote interaction, exchange of experiences, the research path towards knowledge, collectivity, participation (Kokkos, A., 2005).

The person-centered theory of humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers is a psychological approach to education that can be applied to both children and adults. Like Knowles, he emphasizes the self and the individual's need for self-development and self-direction.

He argues that the goal of education is the fully functional human being and does not hesitate to use psychotherapeutic techniques for educational purposes.

His approach starts from the belief that people have a natural capacity for learning. In other words, every person has a natural tendency for development and self-realization and has the capacity for self-determination (Kokkos, A., 2005). Consequently, the center of gravity shifts from traditional to active education, where emphasis is placed on the self-activity and initiative of the participants.

Significant learning occurs when the learner understands that the subject being learned is related to their personal needs and goals, and therefore can contribute to their personal development.

The educational process often requires a change in self-organization and ego perception. When this change is perceived by the individual as a threat, it is met with

resistance. On the contrary, it is accepted and assimilated more easily when external pressures are minimized. According to Jarvis (2004), learning occurs when the self is not threatened, while in the modern world, learning how to learn, which is essentially the process of learning itself, emerges as socially useful learning.

Within such a framework of experiential learning, the instructor does not step aside, but instead takes on the role of animator, the creator of situations that facilitate learning ( facilitator) . of learning ) and release the energy and mood of participants for active engagement.

Paulo Freire developed a coherent and deeply humanistic theoretical approach and educational practice (Kokkos, A., 2005). He argued that education cannot be a neutral process, since it is a social institution, which is designed either to liberate learners from the dictates of the dominant culture, or to conform them to them.

For him, of course, education should be an “act of liberation”. Learners, through experiential situations, have the opportunity to process their experiences and reflect on them. They understand themselves within their sociocultural environment, from which they initially receive and process inputs, while they can then in turn act on the world around them to transform it ( Jarvis , P. , 2004).

Freire believes that in order to carry out the emancipatory educational process , critical reflection on real problems is necessary, which aims to raise awareness, that is, to make learners “deeply aware of both the socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives and their ability to transform this reality” ( Freire , P. , 1977). For Freire , genuine reflection leads to action. Therefore, through the educational act, learners become aware of reality and are called to act politically and socially with the aim of their liberation.

To achieve these goals, Freire developed a structured and highly effective educational method, which was mainly applied in literacy programs in Brazil. At the end of the program,

participants know how to read and write, while at the same time, with the help of the trainer-animator, they have processed the experiences that stem from their sociocultural reality, and they have the ability, by harmonizing their reflections and actions (the combination of action and reasoning Freire calls “practice”), to influence their environment in order to humanize and transform it (Jarvis, P., 2004).

The goal of adult education for Freire is for the dominated to realize the causes of their oppression and then to act politically to shake off dependence (Kokkos, A., 2005). Subversive political action will “inevitably” lead to the desired social change.

The American founder of the guidelines of humanistic education, John Dewey is considered one of the first thinkers of experiential education. His work is mainly associated with the education of children, without overlooking his contribution to the theoretical and methodological approach to adult education. For Dewey, education is a component of human development, therefore initial and continuing education must constitute an inseparable continuum (Kokkos, A., 2005) where learners are involved in the learning process with experiential methods, such as simulations, case studies, role play, through which curiosity is stimulated, initiative is strengthened and the desire for more learning is formed (Dewey, J., 1916, cited in Kokkos, A., 2005). Without action, learning has not taken place effectively (Rogers, A., 1999).

Drawing on the work of Dewey, as well as other educational theorists such as Lewin, Piaget, and Vygotsky, David Kolb built his theoretical model for the learning cycle, which he presented in his seminal work *Experiential Learning* (1984). For Kolb, as for Dewey, knowledge is constructed through reflection on experiences. Experiential education allows the individual to actively participate in the shaping of reality. In this way, learning becomes the means for the individual to interact with his social environment and for his creative adaptation to the world.

The “learning cycle” model consists of four stages. Initially, the individual, faced with a new problem, draws on previous knowledge and experiences and prepares to act. Then, he faces the real situation and acquires new experiences through his action. In the third stage, the results of the action are processed and evaluated, their significance is understood and conclusions are drawn. In the last stage, the acquired experiences are systematically processed, classified, linked to the individual’s previous knowledge and lead to the formulation of generalizations and the formation of rules of action.

According to Kolb (1975, cited in Kokkos, A. , 2005), the cycle can begin at any stage and should be considered to be continuously repeated in a spiral motion, with the conclusions of each phase feeding into the next, with the result that each new learning builds on the previous one and this process becomes essential for the personal development and professional success of the individual.

The most comprehensive approach to the value of critical thinking in achieving learning through the transformation of learners' perceptions is realized in the work of Jack Mezirow . For Mezirow , transformative learning is defined as a process of investigation, evaluation and action aimed at changing the limiting frames of reference based on which we perceive and interpret our experiences ( Mezirow , J. , 1991) where the way in which we interpret reality is determined by the individual system of perceptions, which is formed within a specific cultural context, and internalized through the process of socialization. Often our values, beliefs and assumptions are incorrect or distorted, resulting in dysfunctions.

The aim of adult learning is to help learners reexamine their misconceptions and question the validity of those that have become dysfunctional, so as to form a more sustainable image of the world and their place within it (Kokkos, A. , 2005).

A key means for achieving this goal is reflection, while the role of the instructor in encouraging learners to explore their problematic frames of reference and, with enhanced self-reliance in thinking, to be led into reflective dialogue is of utmost importance.

Peter Jarvis is considered perhaps the most important living theorist of adult education, whose work constitutes a multidimensional analysis of the phenomenon of adult education within its social context where people function as active subjects who are in constant interaction with their social environment. They live their experiences within a context, the study of which cannot be omitted, as it contributes both to the development of the self and to the shaping of the individual's relationships with society.

Decisive for the effectiveness of a program is the role of the adult educator, who, through the use of appropriate educational methods, creates favorable conditions for learning, allowing learners to actively participate at all levels, thereby strengthening their autonomy and facilitating the process of their self-determination.

The ultimate goal of adult education for Jarvis (as for Freire and Mezirow ) is the emancipation of learners through their active participation in the educational process and the critical processing of their experiences ( Jarvis , P. , 2004). Through critical reflection on their experiences, adult learners develop their self-confidence and creatively adapt to reality.

From the overview of the work of the founders of adult education, they all emphasize the importance of processing experience for adult learning, propose methodologies that aim at the active participation of learners and give the trainer the role of animator and coordinator of the group rather than a transmitter of knowledge and values.

### **Theories of Learning Motivation**

In adult education, motivation is a concept that is mainly used to design appropriate educational learning programs in order to understand human behavior, but also the performance of learners. Motivation is the most important factor in successful learning so that

a learner who is characterized by high motivation is able to achieve better performance than his/ her fellow learner who is not.

There are many theories that help us better understand human motivation and learner behavior in terms of learning, and these are the following:

❖ **The Reinforcement Theory**

According to behaviorist theories (early 20th <sup>century</sup> ), individuals are born with primary biological drives , e.g. hunger, thirst, etc., which motivate their behavior, which acquire the power of motivation and begin to function as secondary drives. In this way, forms of behavior that satisfy these secondary needs are reinforced and therefore repeated.

According to behaviorists , the concept of learning motivation is closely linked to the reinforcement of behavior that the individual has had in the past. Strengthening a response in such a way that it becomes more likely to be repeated is called reinforcement. Therefore, any stimulus whose presence or removal increases the probability of repeating a response is a reinforcer.

Consequently, there are two types of reinforcers, positive and negative reinforcers. A positive reinforcer is any stimulus whose presence increases the likelihood of repeating the behavior with which it is associated (e.g. money, food). A negative reinforcer is any environmental reaction that negatively affects behavior, i.e. reduces the likelihood of repeating the specific undesirable behavior.

Reinforcement theory dominated education until around 1970, and is still used and adopted by educational systems today. The use of reinforcement also has a wide application in special education and vocational education and training. High grades, praise, special rewards, and privileges are examples of the application of the theory of positive reinforcement in teaching practice, while examples of negative reinforcement are low grades, deprivation of privileges, and punishments.

## ❖ The Theory of Needs

The theory of needs was developed in the middle of the 20th century as an antidote to the theory of reinforcement, where the main motivation for the individual's activity is self-actualization or self-fulfillment. The tendency for self-actualization is considered to be an innate characteristic of human existence. The theory of needs is found in many variations of which the most important for the educational process are the following three:

### **A. Abraham 's Hierarchical Theory of Needs Maslow .**

Maslow (1954) proposed that human needs are at different levels of hierarchy. This means that the prerequisite for satisfying the needs of one level is the satisfaction of the needs of the previous level. When a lower level conflicts with a higher one, then the first one prevails, of course if it has the same intensity as the second. The individual always aims to satisfy the needs of the highest level. Maslow 's description of needs (1970) was captured in the shape of a pyramid where biological needs and safety needs are prerequisites for the satisfaction of the remaining needs. The needs are ranked in the following order:

a. Physiological needs: These are the basis of all needs and are purely biological, such as water, food, oxygen, rest, sleep and exercise.

If these needs are not satisfied, individuals do not feel the existence of higher-level needs, because the survival of individuals depends on the degree to which their physiological needs are satisfied.

b. Safety needs: When physiological needs are satisfied, then the needs for safety emerge. These needs are most intense in childhood. They refer to a psychosomatic level and include the protection of physical integrity from natural dangers, the need for stability, the need to ensure a standard of living, the need for freedom from fear and anxiety, and the need to ensure order.

c. Social needs: When the individual satisfies both physiological and safety needs, then the needs for love, for social acceptance, for interpersonal relationships and friendship emerge, the individual's need to contribute, to enjoy the appreciation of others and to belong to social groups.

d. Self-esteem needs: After social needs are satisfied, self-esteem needs emerge. There are two types of self-esteem. The first refers to the need and ability for success and freedom. The second type refers to the need for recognition, fame, prestige and authority.

e. Cognitive needs: These are the first developmental needs and concern the individual's desire for knowledge and understanding of the world. The relationship of cognitive needs to basic needs is obvious when we consider that it is necessary to first satisfy our basic needs in order to then seek to satisfy cognitive needs.

f. Aesthetic needs: When cognitive needs are satisfied, the individual begins to seek the satisfaction of aesthetic needs, where he accepts and recognizes the order and balance of life but they are less understandable than all other needs.

g. The needs for self-actualization: Even if all the above needs are met, the individual may remain unsatisfied and unhappy if he feels that he has not fully utilized his abilities. Self-actualization also means accepting the individual for who he is, accepting others, objectivity in perception, open-mindedness, democratic perception, autonomy, humor and mental health.

### **B. David 's theory of achievement motivation McClelland**

The theory of achievement motivation believes that most people act in order to satisfy basic needs, the need to influence other people, the need for friendship or affiliation, and the need for achievement. The main difference between their theory and Maslow 's theory is that, while the former adopts the view that people are born with specific structured needs, the latter admits that people acquire their needs through influences from the external environment. In

other words, it seems that the motivation to achieve is influenced not only by the individual's personal dispositions but also by social and cultural habits.

### **C. The Theory of Motivations of Choice and Self-Determination**

This theory is based on the idea that people strive to satisfy needs for choice, self-determination, and autonomy, and that activities that stem from intrinsic motivations produce greater satisfaction than those that stem from extrinsic motivations.

#### **❖ The Gnostic theory**

Cognitive theories adopt the view that the way in which the individual thinks about what is going to happen to him, determines to a large extent his behavior. External events or the way in which individuals are rewarded or punished do not play a decisive role in changing their behavior, but the values they have and the justifications they give for the events. In other words, cognitive theories adopt the view that the individual is active through his thinking. They therefore focus on investigating the individual's behavior in relation to his ideas and perceptions. That is, it concerns the way in which he chooses to behave in accordance with his beliefs and worldview. In particular, cognitive theories put the cognitive image that the individual has of himself at the center of the microscope as this is what produces motivation.

#### **❖ The Social Cognitive Theory of Motivation**

Social cognitive theory focuses on the way in which, through interactions with other people, an individual can acquire knowledge, skills, beliefs and emotions. In other words, an individual's behavior is a product of the individual's interaction with the environment. The first exponent and scholar of this theory was Rotter (1954), according to which an individual acts if and as long as he believes that from this specific process, an outcome will be achieved, to which the individual attributes value. Subsequently, another exponent of the social cognitive theory was Bandura (1986), who mentions three components that assume the role

of motivation: behaviors, personal factors and environmental influences. Regarding the educational environment, Bandura introduced the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to the critical perception of the individual regarding his ability to organize and implement a set of processes, which are necessary to achieve his goals and improve his performance. According to this theory, therefore, we must assign tasks to learners, which they consider to be important and have a high probability of doing them correctly.

#### ❖ **Social Theories of Motivation**

The originator of this theory was Elton Mayo , who after a series of studies concluded that financial motivation is not a defining factor for many people. However, many people are motivated by their need to meet social and emotional needs.

That is, an individual can participate in an educational program with the motivation to develop social contacts and human relationships and at the same time with the motivation to cover their emotional context, which is brought about by their socialization.

#### ❖ **The Economic Theory of Motivation**

In contrast to the previous category, economic theory considers that the motivation for each individual's choice is the economic benefits that an action will bring him. Therefore, setting as a frame of reference in adult education for refugees and immigrants, the motivation for many participants may be either the monetary equivalent that they will gain from participating in a program, or the possibility of a demand on their part, after the end of the educational process, to increase their incomes in their workplace or to obtain a job that will earn them a living.

### **Conditions for Effective Learning**

Taking into account the characteristics of adult learners, we can formulate certain basic conditions, which according to Noyè , D ., and Piveteau , J ., (1999), Rogers , A ., (1999), Courau , S ., (2000) and Kokko, A ., (2005) constitute the basis on which the

effectiveness of their training programs could be built. These conditions are distinguished as follows:

- ❖ Education is voluntary . Adults enter the educational process of their own free will, with clear goals, specific motivations and expectations. Any external pressure on them to “mandatory” participation in a program is expected to almost always have a negative outcome.
- ❖ Clarifying the teaching objectives . Before the start of a program, but also during the opening meeting, it is important to diagnose the educational needs of the participants, as well as discuss the teaching objectives, which must be as clear and realistic as possible, linked to their subjective needs, but also to the objective needs of the professional and social environment.
- ❖ The educational program is well organized at all levels . The infrastructure, educational materials, secretarial support, the fulfillment of financial and other obligations towards the participants are important parameters, which influence both the behavior of the trainees and the effectiveness of the entire program.
- ❖ The content is directly related to the needs and experiences of the learners . This requirement is consistent with two of the basic principles of adult learning, since they come to education to meet specific needs. Based on Kolb 's learning cycle , all learning begins with experience, which must become the subject of critical reflection and a starting point for engagement and acquisition of new experience. Adults learn through their exposure to situations that attract their interest and require their participation. Consequently, the issues, examples and problems examined must be linked to situations that learners face or will face in their immediate professional, social or family environment.

- ❖ Preferred learning styles are taken into account . A group of adult learners is characterized by heterogeneity in many areas, including the way in which each learner learns best. The trainer is initially called upon to make a first diagnosis of these styles, through systematic observation or even by using widespread diagnostic "tools", such as questionnaires and tests, and then to organize his teaching taking these styles into account and approaching each learner individually.
- ❖ Active participation in the educational process is encouraged . Participation should concern all phases of an educational program from planning, implementation to its evaluation. Learners are invited to express their opinions on the content and methodology to be followed, but also to contribute, to the extent possible, even to the formation of educational material, while their contribution to practical organizational issues is decisive. An important role here is played by educational techniques, through which learning takes place. A wealth of research data (Kokkos, A., 2005) as well as the experience accumulated so far from adult education, show that effectiveness increases dramatically when active techniques are used, such as group work with the project method , case study analysis, discussion, simulations, role play, brainstorming, etc. Furthermore, active participation tends to develop the social skills of learners, who gain greater self-confidence, take initiatives, collaborate, communicate, think critically, develop alternative solutions and, ultimately, “learn how to learn”. Consequently, through active participation in the learning process, learners are placed at the center of the process and come closer to the ideal of adulthood.
- ❖ A learning climate is formed that is characterized by substantial communication, a cooperative spirit and mutual respect. The creation of such a climate is a basic condition for all other factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a program to function. The trainer, being aware of his capabilities and the limits of his intervention, but also of the

capabilities of the specific training group, does not function as a guide and as a bearer of absolute knowledge, even in cases where this is the expectation of the trainees, but on the contrary encourages the heuristic path towards knowledge, interacting with the trainees in a framework of creative cooperation.

- ❖ The obstacles that learners face in learning are investigated, as well as ways to overcome them. The path of adults towards learning is not without obstacles, but they encounter obstacles whose treatment is intertwined with the effectiveness of the educational process, such as barriers that arise from the situation in which they are, barriers that arise from the learning programs themselves and, finally, internal barriers that arise from the attitudes they may have towards learning, but also towards themselves.

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