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Insights for Teachers of Adults

In this paper, I examine the field of adult learners from the teachers' perspective. Firstly, I identify the characteristics of adults as learners and their particular needs, which teachers must be aware of and deal with. Secondly, I propose a combination of adult learners' characteristics with 'teaching orientations', as a basis for further research on teachers of adults' professional development. Some competencies can be taught in formal settings, but a large amount of the teacher's career is spent in the classroom where (s)he manage the teaching by practising, and hopefully learning by experience in the field.

Keywords: Adult learner, adult teaching, teachers of adults as learners, practice-based learning, professional development in work life

Introduction

In this paper, I shall portray the adult learner from the teacher's perspective, and define and describe the particular needs that teachers must be aware of and address when they prepare and perform teaching for adult learners. From the literature on teachers of adult and their strategies, we know that it is not unusual to consider general didactical approaches for adult learners. These approaches include elements such as: the overall goal, the choice of content, and the teaching method must be done as a mean of the situation, the subject and the learner's conditions (Daley, 2003; Düsterdich, 2009; Lawler, 2003; Marquard & Sørensen, 2011). And as Svein Loeng points out, we study the same process in all kinds of pedagogy, but, "... some elements in this process call for different amounts of attention" (Loeng, 1999, p. 21, my translation). This paper concerns the learner defined as one group of adult learners, who participate in a general qualification educational setting¹. Malcolm S. Knowles argued that teachers of adults face certain challenges that differ from those of primary school teachers (Jarvis, 2001; Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). Knowles' description of adult learners as a neglected species is still valid, especially when we regard educators that teach adults. The topic of my Ph.D. project is (Nordic) teachers of adults' on-the-job competence development, which has seen less political and academic interest than that of primary school teachers (Lund Larsen, 2011). This paper is a part of an on-going qualitative empirical research project titled "Competence development through practice-based learning – a study of adult's teacher's learning processes".²

¹ The learners at the Danish 'VUC': 'Adult Education Centres', which are institutions, that provide training for adults (aged 18-65 years) who have left the primary education system. The training includes courses at primary and secondary levels.

² The data is collected at an Adult Education Centre in Denmark that provides adult general education.

State of the art in brief

One outstanding difference that distinguishes adult learners from child learners is diversity: their “...life experiences, education, and personalities increases with age and shapes their outlook on educational experiences, past and present. These experiences also influence their perspective on future educational events, including their motivation to engage in professional development activities” (Lawler, 2003, p. 16). Adult learners’ diversity is a challenge because of their different background, life experiences, needs and motivation for the educational programme and not less important the different ways learners make use of strategies to learn – learning styles (ibid.). This must be taken into consideration, when we prepare and perform teaching for adult learners. Below, I have outlined the characteristics of the adult learner as described by Knowles, Walgreen and Illeris.

Knowles’ ‘andragogy’ (1970) is still valid, although not quite reached the status as a theory of adults’ learning or theory of teaching (Daley, 2003; Jarvis, 2001; Knowles et al., 2005). Andragogy is by some named as “principles of good practice” (Hartree, 1984 in: Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p.85) and is based on a number of assumptions about adult learners:

1. As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being.
2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning.
3. The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role.
4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature – from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, an adult is more problem centered than subject centered in learning.
5. The most potent motivations are internal rather than external.
6. Adults need to know why they need to learn something.

(Knowles, 1980, 1984 in: Merriam et al. 2007, p.84)

Bjarne Wahlgren (2010) states that the discussion about whether or not Knowles’ theses are just normative assumptions or validated empirical could be ended, because of the amount of data that support them. Wahlgren points out the essential elements that separate the teaching of children from the teaching of adults, when it comes to how learning is acquired: “...the voluntary participation, the learning from actions and experiences, adults’ particular needs and motivation, adults use of the learning outcome they have acquired and the special learning context” (Wahlgren, 2010, p.13, my translation). He further points out that research done since the 1970s supports Knowles’ theses, although the assumption that adults in principle are self-directing is not supported. Wahlgren has found that:

1. Adults have an immediate need to make use of the content they have learned.
2. Many adults have a conservative view on teaching and expect a teacher oriented instructional form of teaching.
3. Adult learners (from the same workplace) do not wish to become too familiar with each other and each other’s experiences.
4. Because of the 3rd point, the use of experience-based (Danish: *erfaringspædagogiske*) teaching is not without problems, but can succeed.

(Wahlgren, 2010, p.24-25, my translation)

Knud Illeris explains that “adults have very little inclination to learn something that makes no sense or has no meaning in the basis of their own perspective” the learning that adults derive from a course depends to a very high degree – and a much higher degree than children – on the conscious and subconscious motivation they bring to the course, and how their motivation is met. Illeris has found that:

1. Adults learn what they want to learn when it is meaningful for them to learn.
2. Adults, when learning, draw on the resources they have.
3. Adults assume the responsibility for their learning they are interested in taking (provided that they have the opportunity).

(Illeris, 2004, p.125)

Discussion

The field has seen a constant discussion about whether or not there exists a specific pedagogical approach for adults (cf. e.g. Loeng, 1999). First of all, few would disagree that children in a formal intentional learning situation also require some motivation, for the intended learning to take place (cf. Illeris’ above). Furthermore, children are also different individuals, which means that the teacher must be able to use different teaching strategies, just as the adults’ teacher (cf. Lawler above).

Brookfield holds on to the assumption about the importance of experience from Knowles and Illeris, while Merriam, Mott & Lee (1996, quoted in Merriam et al. 2007) question this. They argue that prior experiences may not necessarily function as a resource, however they may get in the way of further learning. Despite this, one cannot neglect adults’ great life experiences, which potentially play a crucial part in the learning process. The teacher has to be aware of the possibility that not all formal learning experiences are positive, which may affect the motivation for new learning (Daley, 2003; Gregson & Sturko, 2007; King & Lawler, 2003; Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005; Lawler, 2003; Sturko & Gregson, 2009).

The more recent critiques of andragogy concern the generally one-sided view on the learner as an individual completely disconnected from a socio-historical context³. Knowles views the individual learner as an autonomous, free and growth-oriented person, because (he) Knowles relies on humanistic psychology and seems to ignore that the person is socially oriented. Newer scholars in the field of adults’ learning argues that learning “rarely occurs in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives;... it is intimately related to that world and affected by it” (Merriam et al., 2007, p.5, quoting Jarvis, 1987). Jarvis’ understanding of learning emphasises the connection between learning and experience while “Learning might be regarded as a response to an experience or even as a response to an experience created through an action” (Jarvis, 1992, p.70). His point is “that learning and action are inextricably intertwined” (p.67). Jarvis’ model of learning process connects the whole person (body, mind, self, life history) with an experience encountered in a social context. The distinction between children’s learning and adults’ learning processes is evident in the outlook that Jarvis provides when he describes that the disjuncture between the person’s biography and the experience leads to learning that involves

³ Merriam et al. (2007) refer to Jarvis (as described below) and to Illeris’ model of learning although Illeris did not invent the model with an eye for adults’ development in particular. Regardless, researchers in the field of adults’ learning have found it useful because of its recognition of the importance of ‘whole person’ (three dimensions) in learning.

emotions, thoughts, and actions. The result is some change in the person – learning has occurred. Adults' life biography is quantitatively larger than children's, so it most likely comprises of a greater potential for generating learning, which is not to say that children's life biography can not include important experiences.

Illeris states that adults assume responsibility for their learning, and Knowles defines adults as self-directed learners. But Brookfield (1986) argued that Knowles' first assumption about adult learners as self-directed is more of a desired outcome than a given condition. If in fact, an adult is forced into the teaching situation (s)he may not take responsibility for one reason or another. Whether or not the adult can take responsibility for his own learning depends on the degree of voluntary participation, which questions one of Wahlgren's essential elements. And furthermore the learner must accept an asymmetric relationship between the learner and the teacher, who may even be younger, and the learner must furthermore accept the possible sanctions (maybe economic) if (s)he does not cooperate or participate in the teaching activities. All of this challenges the paradox of learning, where the teacher, from the outside, must lead an internal process of development while (s)he tries to make room for the learner to take responsibility for his own learning, and has to lead an adult who may not want to be led to learn.

What is so special about teaching adult learners?

Teachers of adults face certain challenges or demands compared to teachers who work in primary school. From the above, we can identify five major themes/characteristics of adult learners that teachers of adults must be aware of, and I have identified potential issues with each one – indicated by a 'but' – which should be taken into consideration in both planning and performing:

1. *Diverse - in experiences, personalities, learning styles*

Adults can be defined as one group of learners. But adults must also be recognised as diverse, both in life experiences, personalities and their use of learning strategies/learning styles.

2. *Rich amount of life experiences - seen as potential resource or barrier*

Adults' learning is affected by their life experiences, but prior experiences can be a resource or a barrier, and old learning strategies may have to be un-learned before new can take place.

3. *Responsible and self-directed - which may conflict with their wish for conservative teaching*

Adults may assume responsibility and act self-directed. But the interchange of experiences in teaching situations can be regarded as pushy or intrusive, thus the interchange of experiences need to be controlled by the teacher, who must acknowledge the adults' personal boundaries.

4. *Motivated by a need to learn - which can conflict with a non voluntarily participation*

When adults participate in learning processes in an educational programme, it must be experienced as useful, meaningful and has to stem from a need to learn, to instil both the conscious and subconscious motivation. But the learner may not have voluntarily agreed to participate, which may affect the learners' teaching experience, his motivation to learn and participate.

5. *Free will - which may conflict with a non voluntarily participation to learn*

Adults are considered to be responsible for their own learning as they are considered to have free will. But this is not valid if they are forced to participate in an education programme. If the learner is forced to attend against his own will the pedagogical paradox of learning becomes a further challenge for the teacher, who has to navigate in an asymmetric relation between two adults.

How to address the particular needs of adult learners

I will now present another thing that the teacher of adults must be especially aware of. While the term ‘learning’ has been predominant in the literature on adults as learners, the term ‘teaching’ has been viewed as representing a behaviouristic approach that manipulate the mature learners in an unethical way (Loeng, 1999). I analyse instead the interaction between teaching and learning. The pedagogical teaching strategies or competencies needed to teach adults (Daley, 2003; Düsterdich, 2009; Lawler, 2003; Marquard & Sørensen, 2011) is a part of the same general didactical and instructional framework as those used by teachers of children (Jank & Meyer, 2006; Schnack, 2005): The overall goal, and the choice of content is affected by the learners’ preconditions and needs, which influence every choice the teacher makes: choice of material, teaching instructions, methods (and ability) to differentiate teaching for a heterogonous group, and obviously subject level and content.

If we consider the different perspectives on teachers’ ‘role’, or ‘teaching orientations’ (Daley, 2003) we may understand the competencies the adults’ teacher must master. We may even find out whether a certain role or way of instruction fits the adult learners’ needs in a formal qualification educational setting. Pratt (1998) organizes teaching into varying perspectives (which I call ‘orientation’) that each focus on the different aspects of teaching and the ideal changes in each one; the importance of the learner, the teacher, the content or the context. Pratt describes five orientations:

The *transmission orientation* concerns how the teacher plans, organizes, and delivers content. It is paramount that the teachers consider themselves experts in their subject matter, and that they see their role in the teaching-learning interaction as conveyors of content. In the second perspective, *the apprenticeship orientation*, the teacher helps the learner not only to understand the content, but also to assume the role in which the content will be carried out. The teacher and content are closely linked to a particular context of practice. Teaching encompasses acting as a role model and demonstrating how content is used in a particular context. The third teaching orientation, *the developmental*, concerns helping learners solve problems by using their prior knowledge to create new ways of thinking, and fostering the creation of meaning for the learner. Teaching from this orientation differs from the previous two in that it focuses on the learner. While the transmission and the apprenticeship orientations emphasize the relationship of the teacher and the content, the developmental emphasizes the relationship between the learner and the content. The fourth orientation, *the nurturing*, focuses on the relationship between the teacher and the learner. This relationship is critical in fostering the development of the learner’s personal growth and self esteem. The content is the vehicle through which this nurturing relationship is developed, and the connection between learner and teacher is paramount. Finally, Pratt describes the fifth, *social reform*, which concerns the ideals of social change and social reform. The social agenda and the purpose of the educational offering are important here and the learners and content are less in focus.

As Pratt writes, “If we wish to understand and influence peoples’ teaching, we must go beneath the surface to consider the intentions and beliefs related to teaching and learning which inform their assumptions” (1998, p. 11). Daley further develops these ‘teaching orientations’ into a learner-centered approach to teacher development. She states that one of the challenges in changing how we teach is to understand the perspective on teaching, or combination of perspectives, from which we operate.

I twist Daley’s use of the orientations as a tool for analysis a little and view the teacher as embedded in his own practice; I will examine how (s)he develops her/his teaching orientation, not make a professional development program. I hereby argue that if the teacher make use of a certain orientation or combination of orientations it may be because the teacher has developed the orientation as a part of her/his own learning in practice.⁴ And as Galbraith and Jones state, the teacher of adults must be alert to her/his own teaching style and ‘comfort zone’ in her/his effort to gain trust among the learners (2008).

Adult learners requirements

The knowledge about adults’ learning processes and their special requirements all point in the same direction: adults require acknowledgement of their prior experiences and their life situation. When we recognize Jarvis’ theory of learning in society – where learning happens through the whole body in a socio historical setting – it is revealed that life experiences is of high importance for an adult learner. But as the authors of ‘Learning in adulthood’ (Merriam et al. 2007) conclude, ‘...just as there is no single theory that explains human learning in general, no single theory of adult learning has emerged to unify the field. Rather, there are a number of theories, models, and frameworks, each of which attempts to capture some aspect of adult learning’ (p. 103). I have outlined five perspectives on the knowledge of adults’ characteristics, which the teacher must take into consideration. I ask whether a certain ‘appropriate’ teacher role or teaching orientation is better than others for teaching adults, or many different roles depending on the subject, the topic, the social setting or the learner’s mode etc. I do not have a short answer, but I am working on it! By asking these questions, we may be able to define what is required by the teacher of adults in a way that separate adult learners from children.

Further research

Research shows us some of what is required by teachers of adult learners, when they take into account the adult learners’ needs and preconditions, but do we know how the teacher learns to master these principles of adult learning in his own teaching? Michael Eraut says that “Until we understand how professionals actually learn as they go about their everyday work, we cannot fully comprehend what we need to do to help students for the professional environments they will work in” (Eraut, 2007, p.1).

In my thesis I ask: What is so special about being a teacher of adults? And underlying: What is so special about the adult learner? These elements are a part of the puzzle: What and how do teachers of adults learn from their

⁴ Research shows that teacher’s beliefs and prior experiences affect their actions and beliefs on teaching, the prior experiences can both exists of the teacher’s own experience as a student and the experiences as a teacher in a classroom of his own (state of the art by: Lund Larsen, 2011)

experiences in practice? I search for another way of looking at the commonly described theory/practice gap, and I investigate the professional as (s)he navigates in practice and learns to manage the needs of adult learners. While we know that teachers of adults often apply a self-taught way of learning, not much formal intentional education is provided for the teachers of adults (Jarvis, 2002, 2011). Therefore, the teacher must necessarily also be an (on-the-job) learner. Working in the teaching profession is working in an arena of diverse needs, motivations and learning styles that constantly challenges the teacher. That is why I regard the teacher of adults' practice as a potential place for learning to occur.

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