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Adult Educators' Core Competences

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Abstract

Which competences do professional adult educators require? The article discusses this topic in a comparative perspective, finding that adult educators' required competences are wide-ranging, heterogeneous, and complex. However, it seems that certain competence requirements can be identified which transcend national, cultural and functional boundaries. The article summarises these requirements in four themes: communicating subject knowledge, taking students' prior learning into account, supporting a learning environment, and reflecting on one's own performance. The ability to train students to use what they have learned in practice (knowledge transfer) seems to be overlooked in the different competence profiles analysed.

Introduction

Professional qualifications for adult educators have been the subject of discussions and research for more than thirty years. In an overview of adult learning programmes for training adult educators in Western Europe, professionalization is said to be the 'rationale' behind this interest in adult education (Jarvis & Chadwick, 1991).

A vital part of the professionalization process is the knowledge base which the professional draws upon (Eraut, 1994). In an educational context, this statement raises the question of which competences are required in order to become a qualified educator. For many years, this question has been a burning issue in both educational research and practical policy contexts, and several answers have been put forward.

The answer to the question must be given more precisely in relation to the different work domains in which the adult educators perform. Van Dellen has identified four such domains: vocational education, corporate education, social and moral education (including general education), and cultural and art education. These domains have different infrastructures, different participants, different roles, different tasks, and, as such, different teacher roles. Therefore, the requirements in terms of teachers' competences differ between the domains. In vocational education the educator must be capable of 'assessing occupational learners' needs', in corporate education he must master 'training needs assessment', in social and moral education he must 'assess societal and learners' needs', and in cultural and arts education he must 'assess learners' needs' (van Dellen, 2015, p. 119). Although each of the domains requires different and specific competences, they all have a common core. In all the domains, the competences are related to the learners' situation and

to the assessment of their needs. In all the domains, the adult educators are required to be able to 'plan and manage the learning process'.

In this note, I analyse the competence requirements for adult educators in three contexts. The first context is three Delphi-studies. The second is a comparison of curricula in five European countries. The third is a comparative study on vocational trainers' competences. I compare the different requirements over a time span, between countries, and across work domains. Based on that, I argue that it is possible to talk about core competences for adult educators.

In the literature, the concept of competence differs in terms of content and meaning. In this note, I define competence as the knowledge, skills and mental ability considered necessary for a qualified performance in a specific context. Competences are here related to the performance of an adult educator.

The required competences are relatively stable over time and place

One methodological approach to answering the question of competence requirements for adult educators in a comparative perspective is the Delphi method. This method is based on statements from 'experts' as to what are important and crucial competences for adult educators. An early example of results based on this method is provided by a study drawing on data from the USA and Canada. The competences described cover a broad spectrum including both skills and knowledge. Of the total of 30 different kinds of knowledge needed for 'the coming decade', the three given the highest priority by experts are 'the psychology of the adults', 'the adult and his needs', and 'knowledge of himself'. Of the total of 37 skills required, the five highest rated are: communication; self-improvement; critical assessment and problem solving; the ability to diagnose the educational needs of students; and designing learning experiences based on needs. Competences such as 'conducting the learning process' and mastering group management processes are given medium-high priority (Rossman & Bunning, 1988 (1978), p. 157-161). In a follow-up study likewise based on the Delphi method, many of the same competences appeared and are given high priority. These include 'the adult and his need', 'how the professional functions', 'communication', 'leadership in groups', 'self-improvement', 'learning experiences based on need', and 'human motivation' (Daniel & Rose, 1988 (1982)).

In a newer Delphi study on *Core Competences of Adult Learning Facilitators in Europe*, many of the competences that were identified as necessary 30 years earlier in another geographical context are highlighted once again. The results in the study are based on responses from 208 experts in eight European countries: Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. The experts were asked about 'the main characteristics of professionals who are really competent to help adults to learn'. The study pointed to a total of 45 sub-competences categorized under nine headings: personal competence, personal professional development (the ability to develop ones' own competence), expertise in the subject that is taught and (subject)-didactics, learning arrangement (analysing the learning process), efficient teaching, motivating learning, supporting learning, caring for the learner, and group management and

communication. It is a recurrent perspective in the array of competences that the teacher must be aware that the students are adults and come to the teaching situation with knowledge and life experiences. The teacher consequently must be able to support the learning process in accordance with these conditions. The competences giving high priority include: 'communicate clearly', 'manage group dynamics', 'stimulate the active role of the learners', 'orientation to the needs of the participants', 'make use of the participants life experiences', 'assess the need of the learner', and 'evaluate the learning outcome'. The study also finds that the 'ability to create a safe learning atmosphere (not intimidating)' and, more generally, skills in 'encouraging collaborative learning among learners' are regarded among the most important competences (Bernhardsson-Laros & Lattke, 2015; Bernhardsson & Lattke, 2011).

The concepts used in the studies carried out over a span of 30 years are not identical. The competences are named in different ways. In the first two studies knowledge and skills are mentioned and assessed separately – although there are many overlaps between the two sets of sub-competences. In the recent study, meanwhile, they do not distinguish between knowledge and skills, but use the concept of competences. The number of competences also varies over time, as does the ranking given to the different competences in terms of priority and importance. In spite of these differences, it is easy to find similarities. Communication skills and the ability to recognise the students' needs and experiences are recurrent and essential in both studies. Likewise the ability to work with teachers' personal development and the ability to cope with 'classroom management' are common requirements. With regard to the latter, there seems to have been a slight shift in focus over time; while classroom management in the 1980s was a matter of organisation and leadership, in the recent study the focus is on 'the learning atmosphere' and cooperation.

Common content across national contexts?

What are the requirements in terms of the competence profile for adult educators in countries with a relatively similar adult education system and culture, in casu Western Europe? Are the profiles (almost) the same or are there significant differences? To answer these questions I will examine the results from a comparative study analysing similarities and differences between competence profiles in four European countries: the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Switzerland (Bechtel, 2008). The study is based on analyses of existing descriptions of explicit requirements to the formal educator.

The German profile presents a total of 17 competences, categorized under five headings: personal competences, social competences, didactic competences, methodological competences, and societal competences. The list of competences encompasses 'taking account of the life situation of the participants', 'adequate communication', 'evaluation and assessment', 'forms of interacting in the learning process', 'conducting group processes', and 'reflection on the teachers own learning', all of which are familiar from the Delphi studies, albeit worded a little differently. However, the list also encompasses other competences under the heading didactic competences, like 'description of teaching and learning aim' and the concept 'transfer' (of knowledge from the learning situation to application).

For Switzerland the competences are described in six categories: Societal and institutional competences, educational planning and management competences, didactic competences, subject related pedagogical competences, social competences and personal competences. The profile contains evaluation, communication, group management in many aspects, and self-development. But not much directly on the learners need. 'The categories of competence domains are more or less the same as in the German example, just arranged in a different order' (ibid. p. 58).

The French profile is categorized by Bechtel under three headings: basic technical competences, associated competences and occupational capacities. The first category contains eight sub-competences, including 'transmit knowledge and skills along a pedagogical progression with help of adequate educational techniques' and evaluation of learning pathways'. The second category contains three sub-competences, 'knowing the socio-economic environment of the institution', 'speaking one or more foreign language' and 'using ICT'. The third and final category contains five sub-competences, including 'perceive individual needs and action', 'deal with group phenomena', and 'acquire new content'. The competences are structured in another way than the German and Swiss examples, but many of the core competences are alike: self-development, communication, individual needs, and evaluation.

The profile for the United Kingdom is in the comparison described as the most elaborate and detailed of the four profiles regarding the different competences. These are related to seven key areas: assessing learners' needs, planning and preparing teaching and learning programmes, managing the learning process, providing learners with support, reflecting upon and evaluating one's own performance, developing and using a range of teaching and learning techniques, and assessing learning outcomes. Each of these areas is divided into a number of sub-competences. The assessment of learners' needs competence, for example, is differentiated in seven kinds of knowledge, including methods and techniques of training needs analysis. It is furthermore split into two kinds of skills: skills to identify and plan the process and skills to perform an assessment of the learners' needs. These are further divided into a number of sub-skills. Along with these 'key areas of teaching', the adult educator must possess 'professional knowledge and a critical understanding of this knowledge'.

Reviewing the national competence profiles described in the article, one finds many substantial differences between the four countries. They use different categories, the way the competences are formulated is different (some are formulated in competence terms, some as learning outcomes), the number of competences is different, and each country stresses different sub-competences. For example, the four profiles give different weight to educators' social competence; i.e. their social relations with students, and their ability to create a positive learning environment. This competence is only elaborated in the German and Swiss profiles. Summing up the comparison Bechtel writes: 'The examples described above present good practice examples which could inspire the development and establishment of competence profiles and standards in other European countries. A direct transfer of any of these examples to another country would however hardly be possible' (ibid. p. 58). He concludes that more specific competence requirements must be developed by national stakeholders in relation to the key areas for the field of adult learning.

I agree with this conclusion. However, it is interesting that when looking more carefully at the different competence profiles, many similarities between the four countries also emerge. Likewise, the profiles have much in common with the findings of the Delphi studies mentioned above. All the four competence profiles focus on 'learners' needs' (except Switzerland), 'communication', 'the teacher's self-development' and on 'educators' ability to manage learning processes and support learners'.

In a vocational setting

The competences of adult educators in the studies referenced above are mainly related to adult education in general. How do competence profiles differ when focusing on a vocational setting? Are there differences in relation to the profiles identified for general adult education? To clarify this I will look at a recent example of an analysis conducted by European Centre for Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP).

CEDEFOP has analysed the competence profile for educators in continuing vocational and adult education. Based on a comparison between nine European countries, the demands in terms of a general competence profile are summed up under the headline: 'Emerging competence profile of a trainer in continuing training'. It seems relevant to compare this study with the previous ones because the scope of the education is different while the target group is the same, namely adults. Some of the competences presented in the study are related to the specific technical domain, some to specific demands from companies, some are transversal competences (such as positive attitudes or critical thinking), and some are 'training-related competences' or pedagogical/didactic competences. The transversal competences encompass 'social and interpersonal competences' (including communication skills) and are identified as the most important for a trainer. The following competences are found in many of the national competence profiles: 'self-reflection'; 'the ability to assess one's own teaching'; and 'responsibility for 'continuing professional development and further learning'(CEDEFOP, 2013, pp. 73-78).

These more general descriptions are unfolded in a memorandum titled 'Guiding principles on professional development of trainers in vocational education and training' developed in cooperation with the European Commission. In an integrated overview across the countries named 'generic in-company trainer competence', the four mentioned categories of competences are specified. Under 'training-related competences', four categories are listed: a) training needs assessment, b) training design, c) training delivery, and d) assessment of learning. Under each of these headings, several sub-competences are outlined. Under 'training delivery', for example, the following sub-competences are listed:

- knowledge of training and learning facilitation methods and techniques, group dynamics, learning styles, equal opportunities principles, and ethical principles;
- ability to create a positive and stimulating learning environment;
- ability to motivate learners to apply their knowledge, skills and competences in workplace situations;

- ability to select and apply appropriate training methods and techniques, and flexibility of approach.

Under 'transversal competences', eleven sub-competences are listed. These competences could be categorised in different forms of communication skills, social management abilities and self-development competences (e.g. 'ability to identify own knowledge and competence gaps and learning needs') (CEDEFOP, 2014, pp. 42-43).

It is noteworthy that in a vocational setting the traditional pedagogical competences are not enough. A broader and more vocationally oriented competence profile is needed. The adult educator should possess solid knowledge and skills closely connected to the need of the company and to the technical domain. However, it is also noteworthy that the specified pedagogical competences are very similar to the pedagogical competences identified in the other analyses. As such, 'training needs assessment' plays a significant role in the competences mentioned (as we have seen in other competence profiles). The importance of the context for learning is underlined by the key role afforded 'ability to create a positive and stimulating learning environment' in relation to 'training delivery'.

In the report it is mentioned that 'it should not be expected that all categories of trainers should possess the same sets and levels of competences'. To illustrate the differences, the report provides examples from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. The actual descriptions for the three countries contain many similarities while at the same time differing in terms of particular sub-competences. In Belgium, importance is attached to the institutional framework, while in Germany the focus is on trainee recruitment. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, guidance and supervision are considered key (CEDEFOP, 2014, pp. 44-51). The specific competence profile must be elaborated in relation to the specific work-function and to the national differences in culture and organization of the training system. However, many or most of the competences related to teaching are recurrent and common across the different situations.

Differences between cultures

Above I have looked at studies which are mostly based on data from Europe. Does the same picture emerge if we compare adult educator qualification across more diverse cultural contexts? Some studies indicate that the picture will be more complex.

A comparative study of adult educator competences in India, Latvia and Lithuania concludes that: 'There is the most significant difference among the three countries on (the ability to be) attentive, extroverted, open minded, and emotionally stable. Also there is a very significant difference among the three countries on authentic, humorous, and altruistic (competences)'. However, all three countries ascribed future top priority to developing the competence to be emotionally stable, open-minded, and attentive (Surikova, Zuzeviciute, Reddy, & Devi, 2015, p. 82).

A comparison between Europe and China concludes that: 'in Europe quite differentiated views prevail, which take into account the huge heterogeneity of the field. (…) In China, on the other hand, adult education – which there is mainly based in universities – is predominantly understood

as a means to upskill the workforce'. As such, the article states that teachers' competences are more complex in a European than in a Chinese context. However, the study also points out that in China 'trainers should be able to change their roles at different times, working in different roles with different working methods, so as to deliver the training efficiently' (Lattke & Zhu, 2010, p. 95-102).

Not surprisingly differences between cultures can be documented as having impact on the perception of the adult educator's competence profile. Even so it seems possible to find important similarities. A recent study on the development of a tool for improving the professional competences of trainers in adult education, named Validpack, concludes that the tool is easily adaptable to different national regulations, sector specificity and different types of professionals. The study, based on implementation in several European countries and in Indonesia and India, confirmed that the validation tool can potentially be used in and adapted to different national and regional contexts, both for countries with advanced systems and practices for validation of competencies, and for countries where such systems and practices are more limited. The study indicates that core competences exist across national borders (Sava & Shah, 2015).

Discussion

The question asked at the beginning of this note was: which competences are required in order to become a qualified adult educator? Over the years this question has been explored from different angles and within various contexts. Here I have compared the results from three positions: comparing Delphi studies, comparing national curricula, and a comparative study of competences for vocational trainers. The aim was to shed some light on the question and to illustrate the diversity of the field. At the same time I have tried to find some common and recurring elements in the adult educator's competence profile.

It is easy to conclude that the complexity in the field is immense. None of the compared competence profiles are alike. They differ in number of categories and in number of sub-competences. They differ in the concepts used and in the way the requirements are formulated. There are differences between national approaches and between various subfields in the understanding of which core competences are needed. Nevertheless, there seems to a considerable intersection between these different perceptions.

First of all it is important to stress that an answer to the question must be set against the backdrop of the particular type of adult education in question and in relation to the context in which the education takes place.

However, there seems to be a common agreement over time, between countries and across the different fields of education that some competences related to adult education are important. It seems to be possible to sum up that a qualified adult educator must be able to:

- Communicate the subject to students in an understandable and inspiring manner using the appropriate pedagogical methods
- Relate to the students' preconditions taken in a broad sense
- Create a constructive learning environment characterised by commitment, confidence and tolerance, and positive relationships between students and between students and teacher
- Reflect on one's own experiences in order to constantly improve performance.

It is worth noting that subject knowledge – related to the specific context – and the ability to communicate it to students is an important competence, but by no means the only one. A qualified adult educator must be able to support students' learning processes and create and maintain conditions amenable to learning.

Most of the competences outlined above are related to the process of teaching and learning, the process of acquiring knowledge and skills. However, competence is more than that. Competence means the ability to offer a qualified performance in a specific context. Accordingly, it is just as important to teach students to apply what they have learned in future practice as teaching them to learn. The adult educator must help the learner to acquire competences and to use competences. The adult educator must be able to train the students to transfer knowledge. 'The educator/trainer must help the learner to amalgamate his different kinds of knowledge (and) to transfer his competencies (to practice)' (Freynet, 2008, p. 30). Several studies show that transfer is lacking in many adult education programmes (Clarke, 2013; Harris & Sass, 2010; Wahlgren, 2015).

This kind of competence, the competence to train students to transfer knowledge, seems to be overlooked in the various overviews provided in the literature; such competences are, at least, not highlighted in the different competence profiles presented above.

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