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Educational Implications of Transformative Learning: a multicase study in Portugal¹

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Abstract

In this paper we will present two initiatives of education and training of adults in Portugal and problematize the relation between them and the principles of transformative learning, from the analysis of the practices of the Professionals working in that fields.

Introduction

The Hamburg Conference, in 1997, marked a new stage at the Adult Education, introducing the concept of Lifelong Learning. Portugal has made, over the last thirty years, a significant investment in the qualification of the population at all levels of education, in order to catch up from the more developed countries. However, it is yet evident the high rates of illiteracy among older generations and the low levels of schooling of adults and youth, many of them without basic schooling.

In order to reverse this scenario, the Government created the New Opportunities Initiative which aims to (re)qualify the Portuguese population presenting, for such, training paths for youth and adults. Of this Initiative, we emphasize, in this communication, the process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competencies (RVCC) and the Courses of Education and Training of Adults (Courses EFA), because this is our object of study, as well as the Mediation figures associated with these modalities.

Very briefly, we can say that the process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences is based on the identification of the adult's life history by them, in order to get a certification of the 3rd Grade or High School. In concrete terms, the adults involved in this process produce a narrative, referring to the various experiences they have endured throughout their lives, in various contexts.

The adults are supervised by a Professional of Recognition and Validation of Skills (RVC Professional) that will collaborate with participants in this process, in order to contribute and facilitate reflection and deconstruction of their journey and by the trainers of the areas that must be validated for certification.

Ultimately, the adults present, before a grand jury, their work during the journey and they are given a partial or full validation of the skills necessary to obtain the degree they look for.

With regard to EFA Courses, they may play a part at school, giving only one level of schooling or they may be of dual certification, providing academic and professional certification and this is the perspective we will focus in this text.

Thus, a Course of Adult Education and Training lasts for about 18 months and consists of two components: a scholar and a technological. At the end of the sessions in context of classroom, the trainees must perform 120 hours of Practical Training in the Context of Work

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and only with the approval of this component and its report they will be entitled to certification.

The training is organized into Themes of Life, topics relevant to the trainees and chosen by them and the assessment is qualitative, formative and continuous. For such, active and interactive methods are used, based on real situations and life experiences of the learners, in the sense that they can reflect on the reality that surrounds them. In this context, it is intended that the adults become an active part in their learning, developing their critical faculties, their capacity for reflection and questioning.

These are processes that, in theory, are of transformative practices, backed by significant learning. However, these measures have emerged in order to bridge gaps, respond to statistics and meet economic targets, so we must reflect on the purpose of these arrangements and on their pedagogical possibilities.

Are these pathways consistent with a dynamic of personal, social and professional development of the adults or are we moving towards the facilitation, following a Taylorist educational trajectory, where the main interest is, for the institutions that promote these actions, to achieve results in order to certify more and not better our population?

On the other hand, are adults who come to these processes motivated to learn or they see them as a way to reach the desired level of education in a short time and with little effort?

If so, what is the role of the pedagogical teams responsible for the processes the adults face? The practice of Mediation makes sense in an economic logic? Is the work of the RVC Professionals, EFA Mediators and all other elements of the pedagogical teams, so that adults can become more skilled, conscious and autonomous citizens, a waste of time and resources? Is there here a truly transformative learning?

These are some of the questions that we intend to answer with our research work and on which we will present some reflections in this text.

Methodology

Our research focuses on a comparative study between Portugal and France with regard to the figures of Mediation in the models of RVCC and EFA Courses (Portugal) and *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* (VAE - France). To this end, we used a qualitative methodology, based on a multicase study: a New Opportunities Centre (CNO), which develops the RVCC process, an Association for Local Development and a Professional School that promote EFA Courses, in Portugal and in France we are working with two Universities and two Academic Centres, who develop VAE devices.

We used as research strategies for collecting data: direct observation, written narratives and semi-directive interviews. In this paper, we will only focus on the study that we have developed in Portugal in the CNO and in the Association for Local Development and in the preliminary data resulting from direct observations, since we are yet conducting the exploratory study.

The observation took place between February and December 2010 in two institutions. In one, the CNO, our observations focused on the process developed by four professionals of the RVCC process. In the other institution, we focused on the observation of a Mediator of three EFA Courses.

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Table 1 - Summary table of the direct observation held

Selected Cases 2 Companies	Individuals Observed	Summary of duties prescribed for the individuals observed (Legislation)	Number of Observed Sessions
New Opportunities Centre	Professional of Diagnosis and Referral	Welcoming adults, provide information on the various educational and training paths available, make the diagnosis of adults and direct them to the path that best fits their profile	3
	RVC Professional – Basic Level	Monitor the adults during their journey in the RVCC: energize the group and the individual sessions, motivate adults, help them in the identification of skills and in the reflection on their experiences, establish the connection between the adults and the teaching team	6
	RVC Professional – High School Level		6
Association for Local Development	Mediator of three EFA Courses	Establish the bridge between trainees, trainers and the entity, assist in resolving potential conflicts, coordinate the activities to be undertaken, promote coordination between the various trainers and their modules, give learners personal, social and formative support	13

With the observation made, we tried to understand the functions of the Professionals/Mediator responsible for monitoring the adults and their profiles while figures for Mediation and we examined the records, at this early stage, with the aim of answering the question: *to what extent the duties provided/prescribed and the real/performed work by the different professionals observed are consistent with the principles of transformative learning?*

It is the questioning of this relationship that will take place in the following topics.

The Concept of Learning in the RVCC process and EFA Courses

Learning is a complex concept and around it there are several theories that come out, in general terms, of Psychology. We can identify, in a systematic way, four conceptions of learning: behaviorist, cognitivist or constructivist, humanist and social learning (Kolb, 1984, Merriam and Cafarella, 1991, referred by Silva, 2003).

In the methodology of the modalities we study, we emphasize the cognitivist or constructivist and the humanist conceptions as the drivers of these paths, because they value "intuitive knowledge, intrinsic motivation, understanding, relationship with the new acquired" (Silva, 2003, p. 54). The learner emerges with a lead role in building his knowledge, which emerges

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from the relationship between his prior knowledge, the environment and the new knowledge, in a dynamic procedure.

The assumptions of these modalities point to this continuing need for cognitive and conceptual reorganization by adults, who should assume an active role in their learning process, resorting to reflection, assimilation and establishment of a relationship between what they already know and what the environment gives to them, emphasizing the concept of experiential learning, since the experience is the starting point for the construction of new knowledge.

Moreover, these paths seek personal development of individuals, from their experiences, so that we can also find, in them, the principles of humanist learning, which "identifies the unique character of personal experience, focusing learning on the learner, in positive assistance, self-learning, self-realization and personal development" (*Idem*, p. 55).

The question of experiential learning is very important when it comes to learning, especially in adults. As Silva (*Idem*, p. 56) observes, "learning in adults is directly related to experience, personal life and social and cultural context". In the RVCC process and EFA Courses these are aspects taken in consideration and the experiences of adults and their personal and social dynamics are the starting point for the work to be carried out with them.

One of the most outstanding perspectives in the field of adult learning is that of Mezirow, grounded in critical theory, who develops the concept of transformative learning, which aims the development of the individual in pursuit of his autonomy and accountability, where experience acquires a fundamental role.

Mezirow (2003, p. 1) states that "transformative learning may be understood as the epistemology of how adults learn to think for themselves rather than act upon the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings and judgments of others". The same author points out that "a defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience" (Mezirow 1997, p. 5).

In today's world, we must learn to interpret what we experience and in this context, "learning is understood as the process through which it draws meaning from experience based on the prior knowledge of the adult, resulting from this that learning is seen as a new interpretation of experience" (Sá, 2009, p. 38).

Experience is a key element in adult learning. It is through experience that learning occurs, mediated by a (self-)critical and reflective process that will lead the adult to a greater awareness of himself and the world and, consequently, to his personal and social development, to his growth, to his construction of the self, to the emergence of new and renewed knowledge. Thus, "the subject acquires (...) a centrality in the learning process, being given (...) the assignment of meaning to a complex reality (...), using himself as a resource for the training and learning process" (Silva, 2003, p. 60).

In RVCC and EFA Courses, it is the adult who narrates his experience and/or serve himself of it as a starting point for reflection that will provide his emancipation, autonomy, the development of critical thinking. He is, therefore, in the center of the process and the outcome depends on him, in his investment as a reflective being. This practice involves "the creation of learning environments that facilitate reflection and communication, without restrictions, in order to stimulate the transforming action of both schemes and perspectives of meaning of the adults involved" (Sá, 2009, p. 40).

The principles of Transformative Learning and the work of Professionals in the New Opportunities Initiative

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The Transformative Learning Theory sees the experience as a central aspect and it should be associated with a critical reflection and a rational discourse. As mentioned by Closs and Antonello (2010, p. 29), “transformative learning objective changes in individuals' frames of reference, consciously, through critical reflection on assumptions built so uncritical”. Thus, people and, specifically in RVCC and EFA Courses, the adults/trainees should develop critical thinking from their experiences, as this may lead to the transformation of the way they perceive and interpret the world and, therefore, how to act before these new interpretations.

The theory of transformative learning in adult education see in critical reflection an essential assumption, where adults must learn to think for themselves and not through the eyes of others and this process requires an evaluation of their own reflection (Imel, 1998, p. 1).

We were allowed to observe that both in the RVCC process, with the selection of experiences and reflection on them, as in the EFA Courses, with the questioning of significant topics for learners, this critical reflection is present, although, as discussed later, this may not be available to all the adults involved.

In the education and training pathways we study, we found that the adults were encouraged to reflect on their current schemes of meaning, in confrontation with past experiences, which they should narrate and, thereafter, they might find new representations, meanings and perspectives of their reality. But did this transformation process occurred the same way for all the adults? We had evidence that, in fact, there were cases in which there was a true reflection and transformation, but others left a doubt in the air, because their posture indicated a mere interest in the ultimate goal, certification and, in EFA Courses, an interest in the scholarship given, as we talk about funded Courses.

Regarding to the Professionals, transformative learning indicates that they should have a role in facilitating reflection, towards an emancipatory process of learning. We saw their attempt to carry out that mission as they impelled the adults to question their experiences: what they learned, how they learned, what marked them and why, which meaning they could draw from that, which activities they wanted to accomplish and why, what meaning had the work they were developing; these were some of the approaches of the Professionals/Mediator.

However, as noted, we found that not all adults showed the same desire to learn, to reflect, to analyze critically their daily lives and when this happened, the Professionals/Mediator adopted a more traditionally attitude, associated with a technical and instrumental learning (Mezirow, 1981, 1994, 1998, referred by Closs and Antonello, 2010), seeking that the position of the adults would meet their needs as caring and committed Professionals. Would the transformative learning, in these cases, be neglected in favor of the success of the Professionals/Mediator's intervention, when it comes to meeting rational and measurable objectives?

Concluding Remarks

From what has been observed, analyzed and systematized here, can we say that the paths of RVCC and EFA Courses, as well as the work done by Professionals who are part, meet the principles of transformative learning? Or, for its part, the intention is that, but, in practice, there isn't such a scenario? The table below aims to systematize the assumptions of transformative learning and findings from the observations.

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Table 2 - Transformative Learning in RVCC and EFA Courses

From the work assigned to the actual work of the Professionals

Principles of transformative learning	Professional os Diagnosis and Referral	RVC Professionals	Mediator
Critical Theory	The Professional of Diagnosis and Referral provided as much information as possible to adults about the paths that they could follow. After tracing their profile, she called them for reflection on the options presented, so that they could, with conscience, choose the best path; she put questions to confirm the certainty of their position, “Did you ponder the pros and cons?”, “What advantages does this path have?”, “And disadvantages?”, “Are you sure this is what you want?”	The RVC Professionals followed the process of the adults and, both in group and in individual sessions gave clues to the development of narratives and urged reflection, asking questions: “This experience ... what did you learn?”, “Why was it good/bad for you?”, “What have changed in your life from there?”, “How are your present and future shaped by these experiences?”	Monitored the trainees in their personal, social and training paths and, in the activities, she urged them to reflect on why they were developing that work, its importance for their personal and professional future, based on the experiences that they had brought with them and that were part of their lives and the meanings they attributed to the surrounding reality
Personal development of the individual			
Autonomy and accountability of the adult			
Comprehensive theory of adult learning			
Experience with a central role			
Adults should think for themselves			
Interpretation of the meaning of the experiences			
Subjects with an active role in the learning process			
Critical Reflection			
Rational discourse			

From the study so far, it appears that the real work of Professionals working in RVCC and EFA Courses approaches the assumptions of transformative learning: the promotion of critical reflection, the importance given to experiences, the seeking for new directions for learning, the active role that is given to adults, approaches to what the authors of this theory argue, in particular, Mezirow.

In practice, so it was made known through the observations made, the Professionals in question showed a concern with personal development, autonomy and accountability of the adults and sought to encourage reflection and questioning about their past, present and future practices, making them active agents in shaping their own knowledge.

However, there are some aspects we would like to highlight and which we introduced in previous paragraphs. Concerning to the Professional of Diagnosis and Referral, although she sought to open the range of options to adults with regard to the path to follow, the truth is that we witnessed a case where only one path could be followed by the adult, given his availability, that was the RVCC process. This presents us with a question: for those who don't have a profile for RVCC, if they have no opportunity to follow another path of learning, should they continue along that path? Are here imposed targets to meet, even if it isn't the most appropriate path? What is the role of the Professional in this situation: should she refer to another option although it isn't at present feasible for the adult, but that is according to his profile or she should maintain her position and deliver the adult in the hands of the RVC Professionals and Trainers?

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In turn, the RVC Professionals, although they strive so that the adults acquire reflexive ability (and they succeed in many cases), we came across a situation where the adult, due to limitations, couldn't achieve the desired objectives. We are facing a system crash? How do you recreate an environment conducive to transformative learning, when the very adults cannot, cognitively, overcome their barriers?

Finally, in the EFA Courses, trainees chose the topics they want to work and formulated ideas on activities they intended to develop. However, if there were cases where it was possible to meet their expectations, there were others in which the themes, activities and everything that was associated was amended by the pedagogical team, because it wasn't possible to match the content to address, to develop the skills that adults needed. Given this, do adults think of learning with the same dynamics? We noted that not all trainees were satisfied with the situation and the Mediator imposed the challenges. If their ideas had avenged, would the learning be more meaningful?

It follows, therefore, that, in practice, not always the actual work of Professionals in this field is in line with the principles of transformative learning. However, we noted the attempt of the Professionals/Mediator in that way, though not always visible and viable, given the difficulty of articulating the organizational and economic interests with the characteristics of youth and adults, often heterogeneous and with personal, social and professional complex histories.

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