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Equal opportunities and treatment and the real training needs of adult learners - a case study

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Abstract

Adult training in the field of equal opportunity and treatment is the main way of raising awareness, informing and promoting measures to prevent and fight discrimination in Romania. Contrary to many andragogical principles according to which adults learn if by learning they can solve specific personal problems, these training courses are generally designed starting from the global analysis of problems and needs of trainees. The case study referred to in this article was conducted as a result of a training initiative on equal opportunity and treatment for employees in the public administration (50 adult trainees, Timis County, Romania), which resulted in the identification of specific training needs for employees and local community members. To this end, we made a comparison between our initial training objectives and those redesigned based on the feedback from the participants. The conclusion of this contrastive approach was that, to have the desired impact, the goals and objectives of adult education courses must meet the real needs of the participants.

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1. Introduction

For there to be a culture of equal opportunities and diversity in the community and institutions, desiderata and goals should be transformed into values which people internalize because they have experienced their benefits.

In this case study we use the common steps in designing the Learning Needs Analysis: Designing the learning needs analysis; Conduct (methodology); Analysis and identifying priorities/themes/topics; Improving/creating a training course adapted to the needs of adult trainees. We started our approach to the six assumptions about adult learning (Knowles et al, 2005): (1) need to know, (2) self-concept, (3) prior experience, (4) readiness to learn, (5) learning orientation, and (6) motivation to learn. The learning orientation mention that they want to learn what will help them perform tasks or deal with problems they confront in everyday situations and those presented in the context of application to real-life. The need is "the problem" to be solved – it is a discrepancy or difference (distance) between the current state and desired state (attainable).

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The second strategy focuses on training objectives, the level at which they are situated (according to Bloom's taxonomy) and this in relation to the objectives based on the expectations of adult learners (desired state). In this approach, course planning should start with the end-results in mind, what trainees are expected to learn, and the knowledge with which they will leave the course. The next step aims is establishing by the Learning Need Analyse: *new learning outcomes* and *new priority topics* of course.

2. Methodology

In Romania, training courses in the field of equal opportunities are organized within various projects, such as those financed by the European Union and the Romanian Government from the European Social Fund, part of the Operational Programme “Administrative Capacity Development” 2007-2013. In the present case study, we present our project experience in designing and implementing training modules in the field of equal opportunities, starting from the identification of the training needs of adult learners.

2.1. Case presentation –Who should be trained? Who was the target group?

The beneficiaries of the training courses mentioned above were 50 employee of three local councils in rural villages (named O-L, G and B), near the towns of Timisoara and Lugoj in the Timis County. The group of trainees has the following characteristics based on gender, age and level of education (Table 1):

Table 1. Characteristics of the group of trainees

Locality	O-L (G-1)				G (G-2)				B (G-3)			
	19		14		17							
No. of trainees												
Level of education	High-school		Tertiary		High-school		Tertiary		High-school		Tertiary	
Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Age 15-24	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Age 25-54	36	5	2	6	0	3	2	3	2	0	6	7
Age 55-64	13	4	0	2	0	2	0	1	1	1	0	1
Total	50	9	2	8	0	5	2	4	3	1	6	9

Regarding the decision-making process, after having analyzed the organization chart, we noticed that in all three localities, the decision positions (mayor, vice-mayor, secretary, region promoter, and union leader) belonged exclusively to men (in the Romanian administration in the period 2008-2012, only 114 women (3.5%) were elected as mayor in local elections, of which only 7 in the rural areas, resource cited by ALTFEM, pp. 62-63). We had also noticed that no participants in the course belonged to any vulnerable groups. We mention that there are more than 1,000 inhabitants in each of the three localities; regarding the ethnic diversity, the majority of inhabitants were Romanian, but there were Ukrainian, Roma, Hungarian, Serbian, and German communities as well; regarding the religious diversity, the Orthodox religion was predominant, but there were other denominations as well, such as Greek-Catholic, Pentecostals, Baptists, etc. There were cases of socially-assisted individuals in all localities (up to 50 cases).

2.2. Analysis of course objectives and content—What were the training objectives and the topics proposed?

A brief analysis of the general objectives of the courses offered in the training modules on equal opportunity allowed us to conclude that for the initial training, the general objectives were placed at the lower level of complexity of Bloom's taxonomy. The course we designed and the existing course on Equal Opportunity and Treatment in the Public Administration have these aims: (1) Familiarizing with the principles of equal opportunities and non-discrimination (knowledge /comprehension-level 1 and 2); (2) Identifying the mechanisms and ways of implementing these principles in the public institutions (application-level 3); and (3) Identifying the benefits of a society of equal opportunity and treatment (analyses /syntheses- level 4).

The general topics of such courses include: (1) The role and activities of existing structures at international, national, regional and local levels in fighting discrimination and promoting equal opportunity for all; (2) Barriers and models of intervention aimed at ensuring equal opportunity and treatment; (3) Efficient promotion of equal opportunity for all; (4) Culture of equality and diversity; and (5) Benefits of equality at social, structural and organizational levels.

2.3. Analysis of student needs– Why do trainees need such training? How can we customize the training approach?

At the beginning of the course, we thought it necessary to analyze the needs of the trainees, and to discuss the objectives and topics with them so as to readjust the course objectives, based on work of Drummond (2008) and the information retrieved from Adding Support Skills for European Teachers (ASSET). Thus, were sorted to three methods: (1) evaluation questionnaire of perceptions/knowledge on discrimination and equal opportunity, (2) entry and exit tests to identify their knowledge on the topic and to monitor their progress, (3) focus-group to identify the problems in their area of work.

2.3.1. Questionnaire

We applied a questionnaire to identify the trainees' level of perception/knowledge regarding some aspects of the course topics, where trainees had to use their own personal experience. For its design we took into account the recommendations and the methodology presented by S. Moscovici & F. Buschini (2007, pp. 228-265) and S. Chelcea (2004, pp. 207-289). Starting from the 7 dimensions assessed and continuing with a SWOT analysis, we drew the main coordinates of the training module design, which are presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Main coordinates of the training module design

Dimensions assessed	Percentage	Data analysis (SWOT)
1. Awareness of different treatment experiences	55%	Strong points: The trainees are familiar with the contexts of discrimination, discrimination criteria, elements that define situations of discrimination from the experience of others and from personal experience.
2. Criteria for discrimination	80%	Weak points: The trainees did not have initiatives for dealing with discrimination cases, did not know the legislation in this area, and did not know to which authorities they can address in these situations.
3. Contexts of life where we can discriminate	70%	Opportunities: Correct identification of discrimination situations in various contexts of life. Open to integration in their professional and personal life of the equal opportunity and non-discrimination principles.
4. Personal solving initiative	15%	Risks: Lack of initiative in solving cases (learned helplessness). Distrust with regard to the chances to change something in the case of starting-up a procedure for case solving.
5. Legislation in the field	45%	
6. Authorities to which we can address	23%	
7. Personal example of a situation of discrimination	20%	

2.3.2. Entry Test

This multiple-choice test was designed to identify the trainees' previous knowledge (resulting from informal contexts of education) and the tasks requiring the knowledge and comprehension levels (Bloom's Taxonomy) in a balanced version of the items, as it can be seen in Table 3. These aspects constituted *topics of the course* and the analysis showed the extent to which we had to focus on them.

Table 3. Knowledge and comprehension levels (Bloom's Taxonomy) – priority topics

Taxonomic level /Objective	Evaluated aspects	Percentage of success
Knowledge 50% of items – 8 items Objective: <i>Clarifying the issue of equal opportunity and treatment</i>	Specific terms (glossary) Domain-specific principles Specific situations of discrimination in labor Procedures for dealing with discrimination cases Authorities in the field / competent authorities Problems faced by discriminated people Legal provisions on discrimination and equal opportunity	68%
Comprehension 50% items – 8 items Objective: <i>Recognizing the role</i>	Exceptions concerning discrimination (legal discrimination) Different treatment, but non-discriminatory Causes of discrimination	43%

and situations in which the legislation and competent authorities protect people.

Consequences of discrimination
Measures and positive actions
Powers of authorities in the field
Responsibilities of employers
Responsibilities of the union
Consequences of non-compliance with the legislation in the field
Diversity management in organizations

2.3.3. The Focus Group

We started from the data identified in earlier stages as a basis for discussion on “Issues of discrimination and unequal treatment at local level”. To develop the interview guide, we met to draw up its rules according to the methodology developed by R. Krueger & M. Casey (2005). Table 4 contains the conclusions of these discussions, which were synthesized by summing up the problems identified by three groups of trainees (final score):

Table 4. Issues of discrimination and unequal treatment at local level

Problems at the workplace (local administration)	Score
Discrimination/unequal treatment of employees by their superiors according to preferences for the same types of behaviors	21
Discrimination based on the political orientation/beliefs of the employees	18
Subjective granting of merit wages and/or of bonuses	17
Equal pay for unequal work	17
Failure to get promoted for employees who qualify or who meet all the requirements	15
Mentality and prejudgment of employees with regard to equal opportunity and treatment (work relations)	14
"Interventions" for certain persons in the case of vacancy contests	11
Subjective designation of participants for training or specialized courses (non-compliance with the legislation)	8
Bias in the annual performance evaluation of employees	8
Lack of sanctioning employees who perform their duties poorly or not at all	4
Inequitable distribution of tasks	3
Permission to solve personal problems during working hours	2
Failure to comply with legislation regarding health and safety at work/occupational health services	2

It can be noticed that most of the problems are related to *work* issues such as unfair treatment in terms of declared identity, wages, employment and promotion, training, preferential treatment, etc., which were relevant in the following cases: employer-employee relationships, employee-employee relationships, lack of clear procedures for every negative aspect mentioned before, lack of employer monitoring regarding the fulfillment of responsibilities in the field of discrimination and equal opportunity. All these aspects must be considered as *priority topics* of the course. Regarding the problems identified in the community (Table 5), the following were the most frequently mentioned: different treatment depending on political orientation and social status, use of labels, use of the local budget without meeting the needs of citizens. The “self-victimization of vulnerable groups” must also be noted, which requires a view of the issues faced by each group in order to be more aware of their difficulties.

The fact that the political orientation/beliefs were mentioned in both tables indicates that this discriminatory treatment is a common practice in the public space. The *course contents* should include aspects related to the relationships between employees and citizens, ways of popularizing anti-discrimination and gender mainstreaming in all activities performed in the locality (cultural, ecumenical, economical, sports, etc.), and ways of using the characteristics of the community in sustainable development projects.

Table 5. Issues of discrimination and unequal treatment at community level

Problems at community level	Score
Discriminatory treatment of citizens based on political orientation, social status, nepotism	35
Discrimination of citizens by using the local budget improperly	20
"Labeling" people belonging to vulnerable groups by community members	10
Self-victimization of persons belonging to vulnerable groups in order to gain unfair advantages	7
Lack of ramps/tracks for disabled persons	2
Positive discrimination can lead to the lack of involvement/interest of the assisted persons	2

2.4. Priority issues/topics–How will the training plan be implemented?

Besides the above, some other relevant issues (Table 6) may be considered for the topic and objectives of the training courses. All data combined indicate the need to include practical aspects in the course which may address *specific needs* and which can be integrated at taxonomic levels (application/analysis /synthesis/ evaluation), to overcome a superficial training level, without applicability and utility in the future.

Table 6. Complex Levels (Bloom's Taxonomy) - Priority topics to be included in the training

Taxonomic level / Objective	Priority topics
<p>Application Objective: <i>Identification of solutions that would ensure equal opportunity and treatment in personal and institutional activities, and in sustainable development projects</i></p>	<p>The main discrimination grounds on the labor market and ways to counter them; Ways of notifying and complaining about discrimination; Anti-discrimination policies at work and responsibilities of the employer – implementation procedures mentioned in the internal rules; Union involvement in the development and monitoring of anti-discrimination policies and protection of discriminated persons; Institutional and legal mechanisms for equal rights implementation in labor; Cooperation and collaboration/subordination relations with the authorities in the field of equal opportunity; Specific aspects of treatment and equal opportunity and their implementation in sustainable development projects.</p>
<p>Analysis/Synthesis Objective: <i>Identification of benefits of a society based on equal opportunity and treatment (personal benefits, benefits of the institution and of the local community)</i></p>	<p>Presentation of case studies in the field; Presentation of best practice models; Virtual Learning Environment - Registering the trainees to a public e-learning and knowledge sharing/networking platform (the local and regional authorities in the field, specific NGOs) for valuing experiences in the field and including the institution in a system of collaboration in the field of discrimination</p>

If any training is finalized with the assessment of the results at a lower level of complexity, it is considered incomplete because its effects will be rarely visible. For this reason, we suggest some relevant conclusions for a learning adapted to adult learners, a sustainable one, with lasting effects.

3. Conclusions

The conclusion of this approach is that to have the desired impact, the goals/objectives and the topic of adult training courses have to meet the specific and real needs of adults. The study also reveals that to meet the needs of adult learners, the topics should be approached at a higher level of complexity, at least at the taxonomic level *Application*. We identify the following relevant aspects for the following training courses: “Framework courses” which may allow adaptation to the specific needs of the target group; using Learning Needs Analysis (identifying specific issues to the trainees, to the organization and to the community) and re-designing the objectives and the topics of course; post-course support from the trainers at the workplace (for an established period of time), to identify changes in trainees’ behavior (knowledge and skills transfer at the workplace), changes in the organizational level (organizational benefits as a result of the integration of gender perspective and non-discrimination principles in all activities), and local changes (projects aimed at citizens, positive attitudes towards diversity).

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