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Promoting political participation through adult education

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Abstract

Civic competence is one of the key competencies agreed by European Commission and educational bodies (European Commission Framework, 2006, 2007). The aim of developing this competence is to have citizens who will act democratically and will participate actively not only to social life, but also to political life. Political participation requires knowledge about political topics, skills of using political tools and possession of adequate procedures. Also, the political participation implies the manifestation of a positive attitude toward politics. Last European election showed that the interest in politics is lowering in most of the EU states.

Political participation is not a mainstream subject of adult education courses. Most of the adult education courses on active citizenship have some topics relating politics and political issues but they are not encouraging involvement in politics. This is mostly due to the negative image of political activism as ideology.

In this paper, we will present some of the findings related to political participation and political interest of adults as they resulted from a European Life Long Learning Grundtvig Project named EuroPol. Also, we will present different alternatives of the use of training materials designed for promoting political participation.

The first data sets are the result of a need research survey for political education carried out in eight European countries in February-March 2009. The focus of the need research was the attitude toward politics and the selection of relevant political topics by adult students. Based on the need research, three educational materials were designed and will be piloted in October-November 2009. The educational materials are a training manual, twelve educational films and a web-based game.

Based on these two data sets, we will conclude about the relevance of different modalities of teaching adults for political involvement

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Keyword: Political involvement; adult education; disadvantaged groups; empowerment.

1. Introduction

Politics is at the core of contemporary social system. The democratic system based on multiple parties system, representation and free political participation of all people seems to be the favored one, at least for European countries. This type of society and political system demands that people are actively involved in political life.

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Analyzing the implication of the above statement we conclude that we need competent citizens that have the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitude to act political (Predescu M., Darjan I., 2008).

Political competence is part of the civic competence, one of the key competences that should be trained (European Commission, 2006)

There are three aspects of the issue we have to mention:

- Political participation is an exclusive adult activity since you have to be an adult to take part to political decision, to vote and/or to be elected. So, the training of the political competence should be delivered to all adults, in their initial training or, if this is not the case, during adulthood
- Politics is a dynamic and changing field, so there is the political knowledge. For example, Romania, in the last 20 years changed two political systems and joined the EU, so skills and knowledge had to be updated. Updating the political competence is a concern of adult education.
- Political competency is not similar with political expertise. We do not have demands for all people to be creative and innovative in the field of politics but to have the minimal requirements to a political participation based on awareness and conscious decisions.

The general perception about politics, at EU level, seems to be extremely negative despite the fact that political news and debates have a high visibility in media. This negative perception lead to low participation in European and National elections, the lowering of involvement in political parties and a general labeling of politics as dirty, corrupt and negative activity that doesn't relates with general interest but with small groups ones (Predescu, S 2007). In a global society it is politics and political participation is not only local or national buttackles global challenges (Kock, 2006.)

However, we could not escape politics, so we think that the best way to counter attack this negative labeling is to teach/train adults in political competence. This is the reason that nine partners from eight countries joined together to run a project whose aim is to increase involvement in politics by developing through training, the political competences of adults, especially adults from disadvantage groups like youngsters, immigrants and deaf adults.

Europol: politic revisited is a Grundtvig project that started in 2008 and will finish in 2010. The project' product will be training materials (manual, DVD with educational films and a web based game) for teaching adults political topics in an attractive manner that promotes political involvement. All materials are being developed based on a selection of topics that resulted from a survey that took place in project partners' countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Poland, Romania, Spain and United Kingdom).

The survey had to parts, one about trainers' responses and one about trainees' responses. We will present some relevant findings. The whole report is available on project's web site (Europol, 2008)

2. Findings of Europol survey on adult teachers and trainers

The trainers' survey had two objectives relevant for this paper: to measure the adult educators' perception on politics and political teaching and to appreciate the suitability of political involvement training materials for adult education.

The sample was 57 adult trainers and teachers, from all eight countries listed above, with different training/teaching background that spans from literacy education for immigrants to VET trainers, sign language trainers and academic professionals. Their age ranged from 23 to 65 (mean=38.42, std. dev= 10.65). The number of years of experience ranged from 1 to 35 (mean=8.67, std. dev=8.08). Both data show us that the sample is not equally distributed and rather young and inexperienced, but not unusual for adult education field.

Q6 consists in a series of six statements rated on a Likert scale with 7 degrees from total disagreement (1) to total agreement (7). The statements measure the utility of political teaching for the development of adult students, in different ways, from developing key competencies to critical thinking. We measured the results using the mean and standard deviation. The closer the mean is to 7, the greater is the agreement of adult educators with the statements. All statements were formulated in a positive way.

Table 1. The hierarchy of statement according to the means.

No.	Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Politics related case studies are challenging for adult learners	5,71	1,35
2	Politics related topics are a good opportunity to reflect on real life situations	5,62	1,39
3	Politics is a good input in teaching social studies	5,42	1,27
4	Preparing adults for a changing social environment (including changing labour market or changing education) requires ability to think and to be involved politically	5,29	1,54
5	Teaching politics is a good start for a course because everybody has attitudes and some expertise concerning the topic	4,80	1,62
6	Teaching politics improves the key competencies of adult learners (competencies of meta-learning)	4,40	1,79

All statements were rated positively, more than the theoretical mean which is 4. From data we can reach two conclusions:

- adult educators perceive teaching politics as a positive activity which is purposeful for adult students
- political teaching/education is perceived as a specific field, adult educators considers that the benefits are situation bound more than developing general/key competencies that are relevant outside the social/political field.

Q7 consists in a series of tags that could be attached to political teaching. Even if they could be rated as positive and negative labels that depends on individual perspectives. However, we wanted to know what stereotypes, whether positive or negative, are associated with political teaching. The results were:

Tabel 2. Descriptive statistic for tags associated with political education

No	Tags	Mean		
		Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
1	social action	6,17	0,13	0,97
2	empowerment	5,63	0,16	1,28
3	ideology	5,56	0,16	1,19
4	propaganda	5,22	0,22	1,71
5	taken for granted the status quo	5,14	0,23	1,77
6	social disengagement	5,10	0,24	1,87
7	science	5,05	0,22	1,68
8	curriculum focused	4,86	0,21	1,61
9	reflection	4,65	0,20	1,58
10	student focused	4,30	0,23	1,75

What is noticeable is that the tags rated as more relevant to teaching politics are of political nature. Political teaching is seen as a social action that empowers or enforces a certain ideology or propaganda. The educational tags, like curriculum or student focused or the scientific and reflective sides of political teaching are regarded as less specific. That leads us to the conclusion that the content of political teaching highly overcomes the educational aspect of it.

3. Findings of Europol survey on adult students

The trainees' survey comprises responses from a sample of 152 adult training students from the eight countries. Their age is ranging from 17 to 62 (mean= 25.20, std. dev=8.74). This is an atypical sample composed mostly of youngsters. The demographic of the sample is reflecting our target groups, namely youngsters, deaf and immigrants.

The question “What do you think when you hear the word politics?” left the respondents the freedom to write three associated words or expressions concerning politics. The results were analyzed by coding the responses using different criteria. We will present them only by frequency and value (positive/negative/neutral). The most frequent associations were:

Table 3. Main descriptors and their frequency

Descriptor	Frequency
boredom	18
parties	15
lies	14
debate	13
corruption	12
money	12
power	11
problems	10
decisions	9
economy	7
conflicts	7
democracy	7
rights	6
govern	6
crisis	6
unemployment	6
society	4
responsibility	3
opposition	3
TOTAL	169

The total number of responses was 323. The descriptor above covers 52.32% of the total responses. The responses were diverse so we reduced the synonyms. We could note that three out of the top five descriptors have negative meanings. The other two are neutral.

Table 4. Values of descriptors' meanings and their frequencies

	Frequency	Percent
Positive meaning	13	7.27
Negative meaning	73	40.78
Neutral meaning	93	51.95
Total	179	100

Assigning values to each descriptor is subjective, but we assigned positive meanings to items that are clearly valued by contemporary societies (democracy or responsibility). A neutral meaning was assigned to descriptors that could have two meanings (e.g. power, parties, debate, economy). Negative meaning was assigned to clearly negative descriptors (crisis, boredom, corruption).

This question consists in five pairs of statements. The subjects were required to choose, for each pair, the statement that they think is correct or adequate. The five pairs ask subjects to decide if politic is something open that everyone could participate and promotes a common agenda or it is something close, available to a class of politician that are promoting only their own interests.

Table 5. Statements about politics

Politics is ...			
Something that everyone does	47.89%	Something that politicians do	52.11%
A way to promote a personal agenda	74.81%	A way to promote a social agenda	25.19%
Something that affects our lives	87.76%	Something that affects only state institutions	12.24%
A reflection of political class	30.00%	A reflection of society	70.00%
A game for political parties	50.71%	A social game with multiple opportunities of expression	49.29%

4. Conclusion

Politics is a competence that could and should be developed by adults. Europol project is aiming to develop training materials for this purpose. Based on trainees preferences and perceived relevance we selected a number of 12 topics. These topics are not only political but charged politically so they allow us to train politics in a active interesting way. The topics are: 1. Civil rights and representation, 2. Voting behaviour, 3. Ecology and environmental action, 4. Immigrants and social actions, 5. Immigration and legislation, 6. The fight against terrorism, 7. The fight against organised crime, 8. Human and children's rights, 9. The access to justice, 10. Identities and values of EU newcomers, 11. From social to political action, 12. Discrimination and policies

In conclusion we can say that: politics is an important social aspect of our lives because it affects us all; political life share the characteristics of society; he goal of politics is to promote a social agenda; politics is restricted mostly to politician that express themselves in political parties.

We can conclude that trainees have a traditional perspective on politics as an important thing but restricted in terms of participation, so they adopt a passive attitude toward politics. If we correlate the conclusion of the two questions presented, we could infer that most of negative attitudes toward politics, and the predominance of negative attitudes could be explained by:

- An external locus of control for failure in social life; all that is negative is explained by the action of political class)
- The effect of a political life that encourage passiveness and nonparticipation. The perception of politics as a restricted area for average persons induces the idea of special particular interest of political class that are not in the benefit of all.

Presenting politics as fun and interesting topic and presenting way to access political life could be an effective way to teach politics.

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