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The challenges of adult education in the modern world

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Abstract

In the modern world humans need to be able to deal with uncertainty and to give up what is not functional. Thus, informational learning, which is meant as the acquisition of new information by addition, hardly answers this challenge. The learners need to not only acquire new knowledge, but they also need to assess and change their assumptions regarding an issue at hand, at this point transformative learning occurs.

One of the methods through which transformative learning could be unearthed is the contact with art (aesthetic experience) which offers a variety of meanings and symbols that may allow the learners to articulate delicate meanings on a certain issue which may not be easily approached through rational argumentation.

The need for a complex way of making sense

During the last decades, under the influence of globalization, rapid changes occurred within the world's economic-technical field. Global trade liberalization and capital mobility, combined with the rapid development of new technologies, created an international market governed by volatility conditions and strong competition. This situation has a significant impact on working patterns. Employees are increasingly forced to function in vaguely defined environments, to manage complex and unpredictable circumstances and to adjust to the constant transformations of the production process. Conversely, changes at the socio-political level are equally significant. Mass population displacements imply the need for migrants, internal migrants, returnees and refugees to adapt to

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new social conditions. The intensity of social exclusion raises the necessity of complex action plans, aiming to the participation of all citizens in socio-political developments. Moreover, the contemporary crisis of traditional social structures, such as family, communities and associations, is leading to the fact that more and more people are required to selfdefine their course through uncertain conditions.

Consequently, the formation of new understandings and practices becomes increasingly needed by individuals as well as societies. Humans need to be able to deal with uncertainty and to give up or refuse what is not functional, while at the same time to be able to replace it with something acceptable and practical. Thus, we need to create a complex system of making sense and organizing experiences. We need to obtain the capacity to regulate our conflicting values and desires, to make a generalization across them and subordinate them under a larger perspective. In other words, we are called to have an internal authority by which we ourselves are able of elaborating circumstances, sorting through the expectations of us and – in the light of our value system – (re)define our behavior in a functional way, toward our emancipation. We all need the creation of the ability to be ready to change ourselves in line with the even more complicated processes of production and social evolution.

Thus, it becomes obvious that the challenge of living as an adult in the modern world requires something more than the informational (or instrumental) learning. The purpose of informational learning is the acquisition of new information by addition, meaning that the new elements are linked as an addition to a pattern that is already established (Illeris, 2009).

Let's take an example. Let's assume that an ICT trainer, trains trainers on a new computer system, which they will be obliged to use at their schools. Let's assume that this new system provides them with a lot of new and useful information.

However, it is possible that after the completion of the training program, many trainers will not apply what they have learnt at their work. (In Greece this has happened with approximately half of the teachers who have attended such programmes.)

Why does this happen? Because the trainer didn't help the trainees deal critically with their beliefs and desires regarding the use of technology. Perhaps some, who are older, regard this new knowledge as useless, as they are to retire soon. Others might have made an effort 2-3 years ago to learn a different computer system which will be substituted by the new one, and therefore do not have a positive disposition towards it. They are disturbed by the constant technological changes that are connected to their duties, as they disrupt the status quo of their professional lives.

It becomes obvious in our example that learners should understand the issue of the training program, not only in terms of acquisition of new knowledge, but in a more complex and different way. The trainer shouldn't limit his work to offering new information. He should also discuss critically with the trainees regarding their experiences and dispositions towards ICT, and help them redefine their relevant assumptions and behavior in a functional way.

At this point of educational or training programs, when the learners do not only add new knowledge to their brain and do not simply learn about solving a problem, but they also challenge and change their assumptions and actions regarding an issue at hand, transformative learning occurs.

According to Kegan (1994, 2000) a transformative learning process may occur when our way of knowing moves from a "subject's" situation (within which we are run by, identified with and captive of our thoughts and feelings that we have already adopted through the process of our socialization) to an "object's" situation, where we are critically opposed to the thoughts and feelings we say we have, exercise control over them and construct a relationship to them. Let's see an example regarding the curricular form of the lesson of History: When the learners just assimilate the facts, and the narrative line of the facts, we have informational learning. But we have transformative learning when they seek for the internal logic of the discipline of History, how History is written, its dependence on the perspectives of the historians and how their various inferences could be evaluated and related to each other.

Moreover, according to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning is a process within which we critically assess our problematic assumptions, namely explore of all their aspects, give and ask for reasons, move back and forth between different perspectives towards the claimed.

Consequently, in the modern world, learners might not only master content, but also do it so in a way that leads to more integrated and critical understanding of themselves and the world around them. However worthy and important information may be within the educational process, it is also crucial to attempt to provide learners with

ways that arouse curiosity and critical awareness.

The role of emotions in transformative learning

Nevertheless, the challenges of transformative learning require something more than the process of critical reflection. A number of important thinkers have highlighted the importance of creating space and giving voice to emotion-laden issues within the environments of adult education. Carl Rogers (1961) claimed that education becomes integrated and its outcomes are deeper when the learners are involved with their whole self: feelings, intuition and cognition. Later on, other scholars challenged the cognitive reductionism in the learning process. For instance, Boud, Keogh and Walker (2002) created a model of reflection process within which the role of feelings is central: First, the learners recall and investigate an experience. At a second stage, they explore their feelings which are related to the experience in order to make the best of the positive elements and transform the negative ones. Finally, a reexamination of the experience takes place as well as an incorporation of the new elements in the learners' frame of reference.

Another theorist of learning, Knud Illeris, stated (2002) that knowledge and emotions constitute an interwoven pattern of function that together characterize the internal process of learning. The cognitive structures are always emotionally obsessed, while the emotional patterns are always affected by cognitive influences. Here, Illeris met the findings of the brain researchers, such as Goleman (1995) and Damasio (1994): The emotions are intimately bound up with judgments we make and they give our lives meaning. They have an integral role in our way of understanding the world and occur at all stages of any learning process.

Thus, negative emotions can disrupt the learning process in the brain, while positive emotions may increase learners' engagement in deep learning (OECD, 2010). Consequently, adult educators should provide space for the expression of the learners' emotions, as well as for the development of intersubjective processes of mutual respect, care and recognition**.**

The role of aesthetic experience in transformative learning

I will not attempt to describe here specific teaching and learning techniques that align with the enhancement of critical reflective and intersubjective goals. The literature of adult education is replete with descriptions of, e.g., experiential learning, problem-based, active, situational, relational, art-based, discussion-based, studentcentered learning. But, in the last part of this presentation, I will refer indicatively to the way in which aesthetic experience (namely the contact with works of art and their exploration) may unearth critical and affective dimensions of learning.

Several important scholars (e.g. Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1990; Greene, 2000; Perkins, 1994) have argued that the contact with art (aesthetic experience) offers us the possibility to process a variety of symbols and views through which it is possible to articulate delicate meanings and to draw on reflective, affective and imaginative situations-thus leading to the exploration of perspectives which may not be easily approached through rational argumentation. Furthermore, Dewey and the theorists of Frankfurt School have stated the importance of aesthetic experience in triggering the revision and reformulation of meaning perspectives. More precisely, Dewey (1934) underlined the power of art to deny the numb, the imperturbable and unmovable and to "break through the crust of conventionality […] reject the static, the automatic, the merely habitual" (p. 48). Moreover, the theorists of Frankfurt's School (Adorno, 1986; Horkheimer, 1938/1984; Marcuse, 1978) have clearly stated that the works of art of high aesthetic value have an emancipatory dynamic in the sense that they can trigger a critical mode of thinking. This happens because the significant artworks have a holistic and anti-conventional nature, they are susceptible to multiple interpretations and they also explore the human condition in depth. Their texture contradicts the norms of status quo and, thus, challenges the stereotyped orienting predispositions of mind.

A case study

In order to apply these ideas, namely how aesthetic experience can be used for the development of transformative learning, a European Grundtvig Multilateral Project "ARTiT" has been created, in which Professor Liliana Ezechil and myself have contributed, and which was implemented in Denmark, Greece, Romania and Sweden. The project used the method "Critical and Creative Learning through Aesthetic Experience", which is composed by six stages. I will present these stages through an example which is drawn from the experience in a program for training trainers.

The first stage consists of determination of the taken for granted, stereotyped assumptions of the participants, which should be approached critically.

For instance, at a certain point of the train-the-trainers program, the educator felt that the participants shared rather stereotyped assumptions concerning the issue:"Characteristics and attitudes of a thinker". Most of them expressed the opinion that a thinker is a kind of mature-aged man, who possesses wisdom, and who approaches knowledge mainly through books, being in isolation from the social environment and from social praxis. So, the educator decides to elicit the consent of the participants to further examine this issue.

At the second stage, the educator facilitates a process, though which the participants express their opinions about the issue. In our example, they first expressed individually (noting down their opinion) and, then collectively (orally), their ideas about the characteristics and attitudes of a thinker**.**

At the third stage, the educator examines the answers and identifies, with the participation of learners, some critical questions that should be approached, in order to re-assess the taken for granted assumptions.

In our example, we witness the identification of critical questions about the characteristics and the attitudes of a thinker:

1.   How does he/she learn? (mainly from books?)
2.   How does he/she relate to others? To society?
3.   Which are the "dangers" and the "rewards" of being a thinker nowadays?

At the fourth stage, the educator identifies (potentially with the participation of the learners) several works of art, which will serve as stimuli for the elaboration of the sub-issues. The meanings of the artworks are related to the content of the sub-issues. The educator uses works of art, choosing from painting, sculpture, photography, literature, poetry, theater, cinema, dance, music etc.

In our example, the following paintings have been selected, as well as Visconti's film "Il Gatopardo".

Rembrandt: A thinker in his study
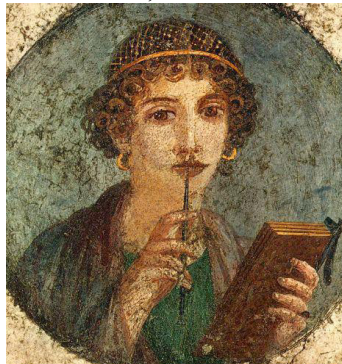
Fresco from Pompeii: A Thinker

Raphael: The School of Athens

At the fifth stage the educator facilitates a process, which aims to use the works of art, in order to reveal as many different dimensions as possible to the participants, while offering the opportunity to revisit their initial views. In our example, the educator animated a consecutive exploration of the selected artworks of art, in order to offer the participants the chance to re-examine their initial approach. Each artwork was analyzed and connected to the related critical questions. Each participant expressed his/her experiences, feelings and thoughts.

At the last (sixth) stage, the educator facilitates a critical review and enrichment of the participants' initial opinions. She facilitates the re-examination of the stereotypical connotations and behaviors that are related to the issue. Then, she animates a process aiming at the comparison of the participants' initial opinion with those resulting from the discourse. In the end, the educator facilitates the development of a synthesis, which emerged from the whole process.

Epilogue

The stated case study has been used in order to show that adult education may not focus exclusively on an informational, instrumental, educational approach, but may also encourage the development of a wider "world view". In the stated example, the goal of the training the trainers program was not limited only to offer them new knowledge about the training methods, but also included a critical approach of the participants' assumptions regarding their very identity as trainers: While studying the characteristics and the attitudes of a thinker, the participants implicitly elaborated the different sides of the identity of a reflective adult educator.

In conclusion, adult education should recognize that both informational and transformational learning are valuable and necessary in the modern world, but only the latter has the potential to encourage the development of a more complex frame of mind, which is necessary in order for citizens to interpret their experiences in a critical way, thus to become capable to deal with the fluid and uncertain reality.

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