Adult Learning as a Permanent Fixture in Non-formal Community

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The paper aims to clarify the relationship between the understanding of the lifelong learning as a permanent fixture and individual adult learners’ opinions about its communicative and emancipatory factors in the informal environment, creating inclusion and diversity. It proposes different issues of adults’ actions: intending empowerment thanks to informal learning, modelling the social change in an informal community, and outlining why and how it is important throughout the lifelong learning process in some personal opinions. The study aims to expand the domain of lifelong learning by including a broader range of human resource and socio-related aspects than it can be found in the literature. The paper focuses on a research study using the qualitative approach, including eight individual interviews with adult learners. These people are willing to describe their bottom-line initiatives and the constant change in daily life due to the process of lifelong learning in non-formal community. They act as “lifelong learning forces” on two opposite levels: inclusion and diversity, integrating these two elements in higher education, mediating between the university branding structures and the individual. The research includes implications for the development of lifelong learning empowerment, the development of “lifelong learning leaders”, and for managing the balance between stability and change in turbulent, adults’ lives.

Keywords: lifelong learning, adult learners’ communities, bottom-line initiatives and local actions, individual interviews

“Engendering students with ... power to engage with difficult changes helps them to support their feelings with evidence, more deeply understand the often controversial world we live in, and build tools for lifelong learning”
Meg Riordan in Education Week Teacher
(Riordan, 2016)
Introduction

Learning is one of the most important human activities and personal initiatives which are observed in many communities. By learning, students engage with the social world around them: They acquire mastery of that world in order to change it, but they also come to accept and respect it and to contribute to its further development. Learning is best supported in certain places—learning environment of formal institutions—but is not limited to them. Learning is life itself, life-long and life-wide. It creates people empowerment in various communities unendingly, day by day. Our contemporary societies of universities while organising formalised leaning arrangements still do not value lifelong leaning enough as a rich resource and opportunity among adult learners. It is of crucial importance to invest in learning as early in the life course as possible, but it is equally important to build the conditions to compensate for the missed opportunities. This defines lifelong learning among adult learners as a critical transformative, and changeable concept which evaluates in a long perspective as an invisible, permanent fixture, mainly in informal communities and actions (Field, 2000). Lifelong learners become conscious citizens, active workers, responsible students, and critical social participants. Lifelong learning enables them to overcome and change the ways in which society and education shape their life chances. But the policies and practices needed to realise this potential are often lacking. In many cases, the institutional arrangements for lifelong learners provide too few opportunities for disadvantaged communities to reap its benefits. In some cases, the official leaders diminish lifelong learners’ initiatives or even more and they are afraid of them in a long perspective (Alheit, 2009). Lifelong learning among adults is a concept that deserves to be at the cornerstone of educational policy and universal practice in higher education. Moreover, it should be based on humanistic values for active citizenship, for social inclusion, and for social change which leads to prospective development and what is more for social diversity to fulfil personal expectations and employability. The humanistic values as a basis for learning comprise the right to learn, sustainability, equity and respect for others, and intercultural dimensions. Moreover, lifelong learning as a life-wide model includes many types of learning, including formal, non-formal, and informal, which all are connected strongly with the idea of continuing education, training within vocational education, and workplace learning. Adult learning situated in these perspectives is a prerequisite for human resource sustainable development for better living and working in 21st century, turbulent society. Together they constitute the main road to empowerment of adult learners and resilience to adapt to, but also to intervene in, changing life conditions. Lifelong learning among adults which is understood as an educational and permanent concept can be perceived as inclusive and diverse simultaneously and recognized as a source of individual and collective fulfilment in unmanageable life conditions. It is realized in a variety of adult learning styles which are related strongly to theoretical background—adult leaning models.

Adult Learning Models

There are many models of adult learning which can be distinguished on the basis of psychological and adult education implications:

(1) Andragogical approach (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2009)
(2) Self-directed learning theory (Hiemstra & Brockett, 1991; Candy, 1991; Tough, 1979)
(3) “Learning how to learn” approach (Smith, 1983)
Presented models above are crucial to describe some specific attitudes and characteristic features of adult learners which are important in the whole understanding adult learning process. Theories created on the basis of adult education focus mainly on typical, distinguishing marks which are visible among adults. This approach has both advantages and disadvantages. Good sights are involved with the specific environment of adult lifelong learning. On the contrary, bad sights are mentioned mainly due to the limited possibilities to build a dialogue with other social sciences. The specific educational environment among adult learners was presented in Houle’s design of education (Houle, 1972), in Kidd’s explanation of how adults learn (Kidd, 1973), and finally in Knowles’ description of the adult learner as a neglected species (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2009).

According to these authors, adult learners have to know the aim of formalized courses and be self-conscious and self-motivated actors in the educational stage. They have gained various experiences and thanks to it, they are able to learn through fully understanding their own social roles and different life periods and through engendering the power in the process of problem solving. They are problem-oriented actors who are empowered to face daily obstacles in the area of specific and lifelong tasks (Houle, 1980). The self-consciousness and self-directness in adult learning are very important issues due to the fact of descriptive and prescriptive approaches and what is more, in the idea of reflectivity and self-constructing educational trajectories in adult lives (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Contemporary research studies show visibly that learning provided by an adult learner is strictly related to a daily life experience due to social roles and life aims to fulfil. There is a close relation between self-directed learning and the level of self-esteem, which is also visible in enhancing the life satisfaction (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). It helps the adult learners in taking advantages of the strategy of critical thinking and the empowerment of self-directed learning. On the other hand, Candy (1991) conducted that self-directed learning leads to stronger role of learners autonomy in the process of monitoring educational effectiveness and results. Candy also focused in the sphere of personal attitudes and personality features which implicate a widely understood learners’ autonomy as a strong individual attribute and ability to create a self-management in the process of learning which can be visible in learner’s independence and his/her ability to determine learning aims. These factors are presented in the correlation with applied theory learning for adults (Smith, 1983) which complement adult learning with the capability of understanding cognitive functions in self-directed learning. Adult learning stems from personal reasons and self-responsibility for the process of learning (Smith, 1983). But we cannot forget about the concept of learning by doing, related with reflective way of thinking and perceiving appeared changes through conscious experiential learning guidelines. Reflectivity creates the awareness of correlation and it is based on the possibilities of social and context learning as well as of informal one and by the means of experience. Making the learning goals radical, highlighting the social nature and commitment, as well as creating educational spaces and place to develop, adult learning clearly emphasises the different character of its features (Kolb, 1984).

Theory of transformative learning focuses on the critical reflection on learner’s experience due to the need of social change and transition to the different educational and non-educational environment (Mezirow, 1981; 1991a). The critical reflection is a field to build stimulus and encouragement to learn in a transformative way and to reconstruct learners’ lives. It manages their actions, delivers the sense of social cohesion in non-recognizable
environment and educational space, and what is more, let the learner estimate his educational efforts in the familiarised educational fields.

The main aim of education is to satisfy adult learners’ needs which appear in the lifelong learning process of gaining knowledge. Furthermore, it is also the principal duty of andragogists (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2009) in the humanistic model of working with adult learners. The central placement of learners here is based on strong belief that all individual adult learners are fully responsible for their achievements and they are always able to develop their educational potential capability thanks to well-established motivation. The analysis of this social phenomenon reveals thus its educational context. Malewski (1998) claimed that it is a lifelong process that encompasses acquisition of knowledge, skills, and everyday experience. It is a continuous process: at home, at university, at work, and while entertaining, building social networks in the informal environment. Therefore, no matter what the learners do and whenever they are situated, they are always learning. It is sometimes intentional and sometimes non-intentional (Tough, 1979). Everyone, who observes or does something in practice, is subjected to formal and non-formal education, by repeating some actions which create dimensions and power of educational influence. The descriptive knowledge support adults to solve the problems on the way of hypothetical-deductive reasoning, localised in the sphere of work or social life. Communicative learning develops from practical interests that lie at the bottom of our commonality and regulates our functioning in all tracks of everyday life.

Communication, the symbolic interaction, is an indispensable condition of experiencing our world of life, defining the place we occupy, having orientation in trajectories that other people move along, expectances, formulated toward us and obligations they have for us. In such a universe of social interactions we constantly encounter information, expressions, arguments or claims. Deciding on what is good or bad, what proper or improper, what justified or unjustified, what beautiful or ugly, etc., we appeal to social norms established through a process of evaluative consensus and constantly embodied in social interactions. In this way we support and re-produce the world of social life. (Malewski, 1998, p. 109)

Emancipatory learning is built on a critical self-reflection that enables transgression of the linguistic, institutional, and environmental forces that limit us and forces accepted by the learners while living in the society.

Accepting the points of view of participants of educational discourse and testing our experience in their perspective, we become conscious not only of the profound subject matter but the conditions of its formation as well. In this way we begin to perceive the relationship between the semantic schemes and perspectives that allow us to organize our world of life on the one hand, and the institutional social order on the other. Discovery of colonization’s influences that we were subjected to is a condition of subjective decision on going beyond the delineated borders in the direction of autonomy and freedom. (Malewski, 1998, p. 111)

It should be stressed that the theory of transformative learning adopted the broad sense of the notion of education, the notion that does not narrow its meaning to a class, teacher, or books to learn from. Learning has started to be perceived as an internal part of human life and takes place in a natural system individual versus common world. Information gathered from being in the world is constantly confronted with information responsible for making the structure of life experience and creating at the same time the dialectical process of inclusion and diversity interpretation that generates new meanings and new senses in higher education environment. It is the way that knowledge has been generated. It is not a cannon of truths established by the
teacher-authority, the truths that should be memorized and consequently faultlessly and uncritically reproduced (Malewski, 1998). When discussing the relationship between education and learning trajectories, all researchers have to be aware that taking into account the content of the second one in the school curricula forces us to adopt antifundamentalist option. In this view, such learning trajectories do not form any system but are the specific sort of a discourse on educational episodes and processes. It is not an ontological being but rather a defined discursive strategies as well as space for both: freedom and creativity on one side and passivity combined with oppressiveness and constraint on the other. Adult learners’ trajectories of life are moreover the play of values that escape any theoretical paradigms. Lifelong learning episodes, placed in adult learners’ trajectories, are reality of contemporary educational world, within the adequacy of describing socio-cultural aspects of life (Giddens, 2001). It seems also to set a place for communicative learning whereas we can notice an important space where the patterns of human behaviours depending on social status are delivered and the ways of coping with situations in a new economic and social reality are discussed, finally, it is a place of articulation of anxiety and fear of contemporary society, empowered by the turbulent and unpredictable changes. In other words, those texts and adult learners comment about our present world and simultaneously they are an interesting source of knowledge about their world.

**Adults’ Orientation to Lifelong Learning as a Permanent Fixture**

Experiences are prior to adult learning perspectives. Lifelong learning includes human socialization throughout the whole life because of constant changes. Lifelong learning can be connected to the meaning of time and experiencing time which Bergson calls continuance or unconscious passing of time, where as individual carries previous learning experiences with him. The socialization due to unpredictable changes is difficult and constant and it implicates the constant changes in the educational life. Learning can be seen here as a process of receiving, evaluating, and influencing elements of life. Learning in adulthood is also a process of changing and enriching values, skills, knowledge, and learning strategies through previous experiences thanks to transforming them into attitudes and values (Jarvis, 1992; Mezirow, 1991b). Transformation (Mezirow, 1991b) or divergence (Jarvis, 1992) occurs when there is a sociocognitive conflict between previous learning experiences and current situation, which is a prerequisite for thinking. Individuals have to think and analyze their previous experiences due to creating a space to learn new things. In this way, learning stems from interpretation of experiences (Mezirow, 1991b). Jarvis claimed that this kind of experience conceptualization can be compared to the situational subjective noticing (Jarvis, 1992). Becoming conscious thanks to having subjective notice appears through forming and developing of self, where a learning agent is a resource of learning and understood as the core of human being attitudes.

From learners’ viewpoints, learning is an action in the course of changing themselves and their own knowledge is crucial to manage and regulate their own actions (Illeris, 2002). Learners’ self-quality is changing and they become conscious agents who are able to handle actions as a whole. The meanings of their experiences support and bring them help, showing how they are inspired by experiencing on emotional and behavioural levels. Theory of transformative learning is based on adults’ need to understand and render their experience, the need to engender them with power to engage with social, everyday changes and bring tools for better lives through lifelong learning. Learners can change their educational perspectives in an existent meaning scheme, in a new
environmental scenery, or in the whole meaning of change. Their reflective learning can be perceived by contemplation and experimental actions. All these stages include reflection processes, which have been researched by many authors (Freire, 1972; Jarvis, 1992; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991a). Becoming conscious of oneself is a sign of maturity of the mind. Reflection helps a person develop his self-esteem, his self-concept as an adult learner, behaviour and consciousness of norms and regulations that provide to thinking. Experiences are personally important because they lead to significance of knowledge to the future, provide learning as fruitful experience, and show that learning process is consciously directed and widely reflected. In different learning environments and situations, it is crucial for learners to experience the situation, reflect it individually, and then create plans for next actions. Skills for planning grow with age and gathered experience.

Learning Orientations and Their Role in the Research Study in Poland

The goal of adult learning is to cope with constant changes in turbulent times and be able to adopt such criteria as metacognitive readiness, reflection and critical thinking, and orientation to self-development. Analysis of adult learning and training concept in Poland enables to state that adult learners’ orientation to self-development and conscious agency in learning is high. Learners are oriented inside and outside themselves, they perceive themselves as knowledge creators and receivers, and their activeness of learning and responsibilities for the learning process remain medium-high and develop after training, non-formal learning, and informal opportunities on the labour market. Hence the impact of all these three types of learning appears. It is important to apprehend adult learning not only as participating or conscious role playing but moreover as a learning process including their role as adult learners, their experiences and readiness to learn, their learning orientation to the future, and prospective possibilities after changing experiences. Furthermore, it is a process of bringing the change into all participants of the educational track, the researcher’s role and its change through the data collecting process. The more supportive role of the researcher is, the more it plays a significant influence on the increasing learners’ empowerment while they are telling their life stories and during the individual in-depth interviews which has been led by the researcher. Conscious participation around learning process should be placed at the core of action in human development through education, pointing towards the emancipation of people trained and of researchers as well. Adult learners’ orientation was about learning, the learning which is crucial not only in formalised educational arrangements: special in-company trainings and university courses but mainly as a everyday life experience, in professional training, in informal actions to promote the need to update competences and awareness in many social contexts, and finally in planning and imagining desirable futures for their spaces and neighbourhoods. Taking into consideration Freire’s terms, this kind of their learning experience, in literacy process, is taken as the way of interpreting the environmental space and the world by adults, with the focus on triggering consciousness process with its function of restoration the people’s ability to act mainly for the improvement of their everyday life environment.

Research Data Presentation and Methodology

The approach to this study was a qualitative one involving a series of individual interviews with a small sample of respondents: eight adult learners. The research study was interested in their experiences and attitudes towards learning in the context of their own empowerment during providing constant, social bottom-line
initiatives. These initiatives were connected with their informal work in an amateur theatre, situated in a small local community of one village. Their engagement in the theatre events is visible by its environment they could live by and where they can be involved actively, being situated in the spur of the moment of their lives, inside and outside of university. They were selected and contacted through their participation in a range of students’ community projects. The researcher do not claim that this sample is representative in any way of adult learners, but that the interview material can provide insights into their attitudes, experiences, and meaning of being a conscious adult learner, social activist, and leader in the time of external obstacles and personal changeable learning trajectories. All eight respondents were involved in three formalised university course titled *Discourse of Power*, connected with the analysis of the oppressive language of Polish politicians and simultaneously they created their own community—local, amateur theatre where they participated in the informal course, which was led by them to understand the oppressive language thanks to conducting the analysis of contemporary literature and its language. Unconsciously, their informal project was correlated to their formal learning process and was much more useful for them to enhance their language improvement awareness according to the language of political oppression. They have decided to take part in both projects because they were fully aware of their skills’ shortage in the discourse matter and due to the life opportunity to change the place of lifelong learning.

Their learning orientation was connected with seeing learning as getting and receiving a better chance in the opportunity to participate in a new political Polish environment, perceived by them mostly as an anti-tolerant and marginalized by its political, conservative language. Moreover, learning among them started to appear as a process of supporting each other in gathering and gaining possibilities for empowering their individual realisation. What is more, learning aspects of political discourse or lack of it as the formal and informal issue was a learning conceptualization of evaluating their knowledge through objectives important to attain. Their assessment as learners was valued and increased by higher level of self-esteem as they were assessing their learning skills and while evaluating their practical and communicative language skills due to better understanding of contemporary Polish political discourse and its harsh, autocratic symbolism.

The essence of learning was analysed by all adult participants, of which they perceived their non-formal learning as much more useful than formal course and as a conscious tool for attaining new viewpoints and collecting needed data to be active agent in the changeable environment.

Eight learners added that participating in both courses was very likely to produce positive results in the process of refreshing memory and attaining new knowledge and skills and in differentiation of important information from the unimportant, and finally learning how to know that something is worth to choose in turbulent, unpredictable times. All learners understood the learning process as a constant development through different activities, formal and informal which bring forward changes to reconstruct previous knowledge when needed. Then, all adult participants stated that learning gives a possibility to get to know oneself. Hence, there is a chance to change behaviour and a change to create social contact, improving at the same time language and communication skills and development of knowledge and skills of self. These learners were active participants in training, knowing how to be conscious about themselves and about their learning process. They all were responsible for their own learning trajectories, connecting their language development to the professional growth. Summing up, all of them understood learning as a tool for achieving success, practical skills, and sometimes also answers to different educational and everyday-life problems.
Learning for Assessment of Oneself and Conscious Awareness

“I am a learner who is directed to understanding. For me, it is important to reach understanding, but at the same time, I tend to make hasty conclusions and present my opinion based on that. Achievement-oriented learning has been now replaced by learning directed to doing and understanding this kind of doing, following then its comprehension in mind. Hence, the more valuable is my imagination about the things I learn”.

“While learning, I need some stimulation and that is why I have decided to take part in the formal course, too. Having everything in order, I am able to break different problems into specific details, reconstruct my previous knowledge based on some experience, and change in my way of thinking. I think I am good at critical thinking but at the same time I have problems with generalising, especially when I do not have all the needed, practical information”.

“I have become more critical toward myself. I am analysing my previous work as well as other aspects of my social life. Lately, I have set myself higher expectations than before. I have woken up and I am able to act consciously during my educational episodes of daily life”.

“I am learning from life, books, mistakes, colleagues from informal course. I have learned to reconstruct my life, build different success stories and communication skills with other people. Thanks to my new and previous knowledge, I am more open to changes which are led by everyday life”.

Learning as Achieving Something Important in Life

“I would like to achieve something which will be crucial for all sustainable changes to succeed in my life. I am getting experience and methods to use in my daily duties and work tasks. Now I am more sure that learning means finding answers to different problems and going another way to obtain certain, personal goals”.

“I am capable to use knowledge and skills in a new way, rebuild their meaning in my mind to score a point in everyday struggling. I can run everyday life simpler and more interesting”.

Learning as a Tool to Self-directed Motivation to Develop

“I like to discuss the subject with other learners not only hear that I have to learn new and interesting theories by heart. I become consciously active learner when I feel my own motivation, knowing that my choices are led by setting the world on fire”.

Research Findings

The research results show that adult learners appreciate their own high expectations to learning during the both courses. They revealed their attitudes of greater trust in the causativeness of lifelong learning process. Learning was valued as a good example of acquiring useful, needed knowledge and practical skills as well as showed some ways of achieving goals. Their learning orientation was not traditional—Learners perceived themselves as conscious and active participants, receivers, and creators of new skills and knowledge. In adult training, it is significant to create possibilities for expressing adult learners’ agency, to direct learners to consciously assess their learning experiences and evaluate themselves as learners who are able to build proper, required educational conditions and methods of gathering useful knowledge. The methods would help to analyse oneself as a learner and to appreciate learner’s role and self-esteem. It was also important to enhance learners’ self-esteem, self-evaluation, and their knowledge of self in order to support further educational choices.
Conclusion and After Study Reflections

Adult learning is multidimensional, expansive, and a continuing process in both formal and informal environment. Adult reflective interpretation and self-analysis enables to comfort adult learning throughout the whole training process if the goal is a direction to reflective and critical thinking learning model. Learning orientations are influenced by previous learning experience and engage the learners’ apprehension of learning and understanding the self, learning goals, and attitudes, creating individual cognition, and endangering the learners with power to change their everyday lives. During both informal and formal learning situations, different types of achieving the knowledge appear: orientation to oneself and orientation to training and learning conditions.

During the individual in-depth interviews and then the focus group discussion, all participants were accustomed with the atmosphere of turn taking and intense listening. The researcher observed the development of each individual participant and what is more, the community development was sustained to the extend that the participants were reluctant to leave. All participants said that they had never had such an opportunity to talk in this way about their lifelong learning experiences before. Instead of the fact that the discussion was really lively, it was finally very constructive and helpful. They spoke of everyday accounts of what happened in their working space which influenced at least on them to change their life, on learning by doing. Putting it mildly, all their actions described the process of becoming their experience. Telling individual stories demonstrated the relevance of their past experience in reconstructing lifelong learning process in their working places, related to their present experience of being well-adapted to changes and conscious workers. Finally, the research study shows clearly how successful adult learners act as lifelong learning forces, relating inclusion in the formal learning, university environment with the diversity of individual, informal learning process.

References


