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## Adult Education and Learning Theories

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**ABSTRACT.** Adult education first started at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it became mandatory to improve the educational level of the adult trainees and also to train them professionally, culturally and socially (Kokkos, 2005). Especially during the last decades, globalization along with the technological advancements, demands continuous education and training due to the high competition and to the need to improve the economy. Besides that, social reasons urge adult education such as sudden social changes in our contemporary society (migration for financial reasons, social exclusion as a result of unemployment, etc). The adults have unique features and needs which make Adult Education an independent scientific field.

### 1. DEFINING ADULT EDUCATION

Here we have the definitions according to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to OECD referred to by Rogers (1999):

*Adult Education is any learning activity or program carefully designed by an educational institution in order to satisfy any demand out of need or interest, at any given stage of an adult's life that has surpassed the age of compulsory education and his main activity does not consist of education (p. 55).*

According to UNESCO referred to by Rogers (1999).

*Adult education involves every educational process, of every kind, level, or method. It may be conventional education or not, or it may be a process that lasts longer, or replaces the primal education at schools, tertiary institutions, or even an apprenticeship where trainees can improve their abilities, knowledge, technical and professional skills and society treats can treat them as adults. There is also the possibility for the trainees to change their course and then change their attitude or behavior with the perspective of completing their personal growth, and participating in a harmonious, independent social, financial and cultural development. (p. 56)*

A similar definition is given by the Greek Law 3879/21-09-2010 on Lifelong Learning and the remaining provision of the Hellenic Republic:

*Adult education includes all organized educational tasks and they refer to adult. The goal is improve the adults' knowledge, to develop and upgrade his skills, to encourage personal development and promote active citizenship, and to mitigate the educational and social inequalities, and this is provided by formal and non-formal education and training programs (p.3402).*

We must insist that the reason why the definition for Adult Education is not unique is because of the variety and differences in the diverse educational cultures so there are many definitions which cover this wide range of countries and cultures.

For a person to be considered an adult does not solely depend on the age but in every cultural group we find differences and it also depends on the different chronological periods. There are cases where adults refuse to take up responsibilities. According to Kokkos (2005) when a person is in the

process of becoming an adult, he can determine for himself if he is mature, something which is also acceptable by a third party.

## **2. CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT TRAINEES AND THE OBSTACLES IN THE LEARNING PROCESS.**

According to Rogers (1999), adult trainees have certain characteristics and needs. Their general characteristics that describe most of the trainees are:

- The participants are only adults
- They are not beginning a process but they are undergoing a constant developing process
- They have experiences and ethics
- They begin education with predetermined intentions
- They have expectations from the educational process
- They have competitive interests
- They have already formed their own teaching methods.

According to Kokkos (2005), adult trainees want to be active in the learning process. In addition, Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) add to the characteristics mentioned above:

- Education is not their main occupation
- They terminate the process if they feel they are losing their time
- Most of the times they hide the real reason for participating in educational programs
- They need to feel comfortable
- They want a social life
- They want to be treated as mature people
- They need to be assured that they can meet up to the educational process' expectations
- They want their performance to be rewarded.
- They are mainly impatient and hectic.
- They evaluate the educational process in a short period of time.

The adult trainees have formed their own methods of learning which result from their experiences and ethics, and in turn, this has led them to develop defense mechanisms whenever their knowledge is being underestimated (Kokkos, 2005). These obstacles may be generated by anxiety, fear of failure and the lack of self-esteem (Rogers, 1999). However, there are actual obstacles in the educational process, such as the adults' obligations towards their families, their limited free time, the physical changes they may undergo, for example memory impairment and loss of sight, or even the location where their educational programs take place may not be accessible by everyone.

## **3. LEARNING THEORIES**

To learn is something personal and each individual has developed a unique way of to learn and of how to perceive the learning process. The ways and perceptions of each era play an important role in how the teaching methods are formed. There are three main learning theories:

- Behaviorism
- Constructivism
- Sociocultural theories of learning

### **3.1 Behaviorism**

This theory says that learning is a result of a series of connections between stimulations and responses. Learning is a change in the trainee's behavior; and the important part is to describe it and not explain it. The academics who support this theory are J.B Watson, I. Pavlov, E.D. Thorndike and B.F. Skinner. Behaviorism has also been referred to as directed teaching. Pavlov placed the milestone for the theory of classical conditioning by studying the dogs' reflexes (Pavlov, 1992)

while Watson went further and experimented on human subjects and concluded that learning is a process of conditioning reflexes (Watson, 1924). According to Thorndike learning can only result through trial and error, and supports that the relationship between cause and effect that bare a strong connection (Associationism) (Thorndike, 1931). According to Skinner (1968), learning can be achieved by adopting a behavior which is encouraged (reinforcement). This is the basic idea of operant conditioning which Skinner himself proposed.

### **3.2 Constructivism**

The theory of Constructivism argues that all humans can gain knowledge by following processes of discovering and solving problems. Education's main goal is to help the trainee improve and enrich his knowledge. J. Dewey, L. Vygotsky, J. Piaget, J. Bruner, S. Papert and M. Resnick, just to name a few, developed this theory. The supporters of Constructivism believe that applying Behaviorism in the educational process leads to a teaching centered predisposition, which in turn emphasizes on individual work and not team work. Constructivism is based on five stages (Tolman & Hardy, 1995):

- to activate the knowledge that has already been gained
- to gain knowledge
- to comprehend knowledge
- to use knowledge
- to get feedback

Piaget's main theory is that knowledge does not pass on but it is structured, and therefore the teaching process must create those criteria with which the students can gain more cognitive skills, and to achieve this, there must be an active interaction between the teacher and the students, and the students among themselves. (Duckworth, 1964). The theory of discovery learning by Bruner (1961) says that leaning is a process that depends on trial, research, discovery and reconstruction in which the individual obtains knowledge. According to Bruner mental development consists of three stages:

- enactive representation
- iconic representation
- symbolic representation

### **3.3 Sociocultural theories of learning**

Sociocultural theories of learning are based on the idea that gaining knowledge is socially determined, and it occurs in environments where the subjects collaborate, communicate and interact with each other, and by participating in various activities. The sociocultural theories of learning were influenced by the theory of social development, introduced by Vygotsky (1962), and according to this theory social interaction plays a key role in gaining knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) invented the term zone of proximal development – ZPD so he could state that the level of development depends on social interaction and social learning produces knowledge. Lave (1998), influenced by this theory, and introduces Situated Learning which claims that learning comes from a certain framework by autonomous activities with the backup from social and mental support. Another version of this theory is Cognitive Apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989) where learning can be successful by doing papers guided by the educator who teaches the learner how to achieve his goals.

## **4. ADULT EDUCATION IN GREECE**

Adult Education was first introduced in Greece around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by certain entities such as The Centre Union of Athens and the Economic Chamber of Athens and Piraeus, and other associations for promoting education in order to reduce illiteracy and to help the workforce gain professional skills and at the same time become educated (Vergidis, 1985). In 1929,

the Greek Government passed the Law 4397/29 in an attempt to combat illiteracy and at the same time endorse them with professional skills. With the Legislative Decree 3094/ Decree 3094 different committees are formed in order to help reduce illiteracy. According to the values of the time, it became mandatory that education must be centered on the people's love for their religion, country and family, and the new formed committees would combat illiteracy efficiently this way and the country's educational and social status would be upgraded. This strategy continues in the 1960s, where in 1965 the committees are reformed, and after the seven-year dictatorship, the Presidential Decree 417/76 establishes courses for adults, and at the same time, the Department for Adult Education is created under the jurisdiction of the Administration of Education. In 1980, Greece becomes a member of European Economic Community (EEC) and besides reducing illiteracy, supplementary training becomes a priority. During that period, adult education has been on the spotlight since the European Social Fund finances and supports many educational programs (Vergidis, 1995). With the Law 1320, in 1982, competent institutions for adult education programs are established, and are also under the jurisdiction of Administration of Education. They focused on professional training without following a certain plan or strategy.

With the Law 1351/1983 again the committees are reformed and placements for special associates are therefore created. In 1985, Centres for the Development of Vocational Training (CeDeFop) are formed, which in turn are placed under the jurisdiction of the Administration of Culture. In 1989 with the Presidential Decree 132.1989, published in the Greek Official Government Gazette 64 A/3-5-89, the General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning is established, and with the Presidential Decree 186/1991, this establishment falls again under the jurisdiction of the Administration of Education. After some time, new changes take place and new establishments for adult education are introduced. Their purpose is to plan, organize and to realize the programs for adult education. With a joint ministerial order by the Administration of Education and the Administration of Financial, the Second Chance Schools are founded which are for adults who have passed the age of 18. In 2001 and with the Law 2909/2001 the institutions for adult education change names and they are responsible for planning, managing, and realizing the programs for adult education. Finally with a joint ministerial order of 2011 KYA 127175/H, the Youth and Lifelong Learning Foundation (I.NE.DI.VIM) is incorporated into one body which belongs to the Administration of Education. I.NE.DI.VIM according to the Law 4115/2013 is a legal entity governed by private law, which in turn belong to the public sector, and one of its goals is to promote and realize programs and projects for Lifelong Learning.

## 5. SECOND CHANCE SCHOOLS

Second Chance Schools accept individuals who are over 18 and haven't completed the 9 year-compulsory education. SCSs award the individual with a secondary certificate after a successful two-year course. They aim at the re-introducing the adults to education, and at the same time they try to link the local community and businesses with school and education. Their purpose is to train the ones who dropped out of school for different reasons, and to help them build self-confidence. (European Committee, White Paper, 1996). SCSs are part of a European program for combating social exclusion. The first Second Chance School opened during the academic year 2001-2001 in Peristeri, Athens. This area was chosen because it had the biggest unemployment rate in relation to the other district of Athens. The following academic year 2001-2002 four SCSs opened in Acharnes, Athens, in Patras, in Neapolis, Salonika, and in Iraklion Crete. Today, there are 58 SCSs in 13 districts of Greece while 7 belong to correctional facilities. Second Chance Schools operate with open teaching curriculums because these schools are not meant to pass on knowledge but to produce new knowledge.

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