

## ADULT EDUCATION IN CONTINUING TRAINING\*

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### **Abstract**

*The article is a plea for the education of adults, continuously, as part of their lifelong learning. The main arguments are: professional development, personal development, occupational diversification, completion/ updating of experience, adaptation to society. From a theoretical point of view, adult education must regard: self-determination, the role of experiences, their preparation and orientation for learning, internal motivation and the need for knowledge. At the application level, following interactions in short training courses with teachers engaged in lifelong learning, several options for transformative learning have emerged, which support the needs of personalization, so that the skills developed can be used in both professional contexts (formal) as well as in non-formal or informal ones. By reporting to the highly computerized society, now, but also in the future, adults can be successfully framed in forms of low-frequency, blended-learning, distance learning. However, the continuing training of teachers also encounters difficulties, resistance to change as there are personal differences in grasping its relevance. Our critical analysis has weighed the strengths, the weaknesses, the opportunities and the threats, and what remains important is the identification of realistic solutions, not pessimistic, constructive and well-founded ones. Therefore, in order to integrate the competencies required by the current society into the didactic approach, continuing training courses can be implemented, the actual integration can be used, through personal reorganization or through managerial or collegial support, in participating in online learning communities and sharing teaching experiences.*

**Key words:** *Adult education; Continuing training; Teaching career; Transformative learning; Personalization of learning.*

### **1. Introduction: the need for further adult education**

Adult education can be defined as “education carried out in specific forms and ways with all social and professional categories of adults in order to develop their professional and general culture and to guide their self-training and self-education” (Ionescu and Radu, 2001, p. 408). In Latin, *adultus* meant what grew, is formed,

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developed, matured, and in Greek, andros meant man, by extension, human. Jinga and Istrate (2001, pp. 169-170) appreciated that it is precisely during adulthood that learning is concentrated (qualification, poliquification, requalification, recycling).

Knowles considered andragogy—"the art and science of helping adults learn" (1985, p. 43), stating that adult learning is a focused, economical learning, and the attitude of the adults toward learning is favorable only if it meets personal interests.

The adult also has social motives in making the decision to learn, but new role changes can induce stress. The attitudes of adults are more conservative than those of young people, and adults consider investing in time to be very important. The life and professional experience of the adult is bigger, more diverse, it is organized differently, an aspect that gives him an advantage in learning (Birch, 2000).

At the same time, for some adults, the attitude towards assessment is a negative one, leading them to reject learning.

Access to higher education is open to any period of life. For the Romanian higher education, Lazăr Vlăsceanu (2005) observed that the main criteria that used to dominate classical higher education, selective and elitist ones, were replaced by the massification of participating in higher education.

The new reasons for adult education are: the need for self-determination (Brokett, Hiemstra, 1991; Caffarella, Merriam, 1999), the employment (especially of women) in civic initiatives; the influence of media on behavior during leisure time, changes in the style of relating and in personal conceptions.

The main feature of the information society is the one referring to the widespread and low-cost use of information technology, facilitating communication at national and international level, but also issues such as information overload and the need to create new forms of regulation to manage the information adequately.

## **2. The specifics of adults in education/ training. Elements of building a career**

Between the ages of 26 and 40, the strong interests of adults are required in order to improve their qualifications, aiming at professional and job stabilization. People of this age, who access university or postgraduate studies (Fishman, 2014) have regular examinations and obtain professional degrees, thus fulfilling themselves professionally. Between the ages of 40 and 50, there is an interval of full capitalization of their level of training and professional skills, the people occupying management positions finding themselves in their period of maximum force of manifestation. Between 50 and 65, the last phase of adult life, there is a stressed presence of the adults in public life and in their professional activity, and the spectrum of retirement or even raising the retirement age brings new changes at this stage.

Some authors (Lowe, 1978; Kidd, 1981) have made comparisons between the learning process of the children and that made by the adults. Self-directed learning appeared as a specific form of learning in adults (Dumitru and Iordache, 2002), while Mureșan (1990) considered that adults have their own socio-affective learning. However, not all adults have a closed cognitive-operative structure. The most obvious feature in adult learning is its slow pace and the speed of reaction. In view

of these characteristics, in adults it is not possible to speak exactly of a decline in their learning capacity, but of a different kind of learning (Imel, 1995).

The learning opportunities are influenced by the social factors related to life history (Glastra *et al.*, 2004; Jarvis, 2004; Evans *et al.*, 2013). According to Mureșan (1990) in adulthood the evolution of the learning capacity is dependent on: the type of activity, the style of intellectual work, the methods and techniques of intellectual work, the preoccupations for study and for self-improvement, the learning skills. The learning ability also depends on the ability to receive, the flexibility of thinking, the energy available for learning, but also the learning technique.

The attitude towards learning correlates with the learning past of that particular person. Paradoxically, those who are aware of their own learning capacity (through metacognition) are also people with an already formed learning capacity. One of the possible explanations for this effect is related to the issue of the learning interests: the more one knows, more precisely and to a greater extent in a certain field, the more curious he becomes (Boeru, 1995).

The role of motivation is crucial, and the willingness to learn is supported by socio-emotionality (Houde, 2006).

According to the research of Jones Conradt (*apud* Vințanu, 1998), the capacity of learning depreciates only after the age of 80. It is very important to emphasize that a decisive role is played by the learning abilities previously achieved, the type and the reasons for learning.

Professional needs are constantly re-evaluated, they are modified, adapted or even changed during practicing the profession, throughout life, as a result of certain social requirements, but also as a result of self-organized learning, self-education and self-improvement. In order to meet the professional needs, both the people close to the individual, involved in counseling, guidance, professional training, and the individual himself must identify the general situations that the latter will encounter in the activity and, at the same time, try to prepare to solve them.

Jigău *et al.* (2007) inventoried and described, as methods of career planning and development: the project/ the personal action plan, the evaluation of alternatives, the value clarification exercises, the skills balance.

### **3. From sustained learning to truly transformative, innovative learning**

Transformative learning is the process of deep, constructive and meaningful learning, which goes beyond the simple accumulation of knowledge, because it supports critical ways of approaching problems and it uses applied-attitudinal aspects, through which students give meaning to their lives, clearly aware of it. It appears as a consequence of the transition from unjudged or unquestionable acceptance of available information to reflective learning experiences (Light and Cox, 2001), experiences that bring emancipation.

During the initial training for a profession, adult students are usually already involved in professional and family work. The same characteristic is maintained if we refer to continuing training. The continuation of training is necessary for the following reasons: personal, civic/social or professional.

In Romania, free continuing education programs apply to the following situations: people looking for a job/unemployed, people in detention, people who have resumed their work as a result of the termination of parental leave, people who have resumed activity as a result of recovery of their work capacity, completion of military service, after retirement for disability, people from rural areas, people receiving services for assessing skills acquired in other ways than formal ones, people receiving vocational training at work (apprenticeship), people who have obtained refugee status or other form of international protection. In those cases where there is no support from the employers or other sources, continuing education remains to be paid from the personal budget.

The National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection (INCSMPS), 2014, identifies a series of good practices, which can be transformed into measures of encouraging vocational training: the use of apprenticeship: the example of Hungary; the use of a Vocational Training Fund: the example of Poland; Grants for companies providing vocational training: the example of the Czech Republic; the application of fiscal incentives: the example of Lithuania; granting a Vocational Training Leave: the example of Spain.

One of the reasons for continuing studies/learning in countries such as France, Sweden, the USA, Canada, Germany, Finland, England is the reconstruction of life, and the number of adult students is constantly growing, according to estimates made by Neculau (2001).

The qualities pursued by the adults in the teachers who train them (Donaldson, Flannery, Ross, Gordon, 1993, *apud* Imel, 1995) are: the ability to know, their concern for the act of learning, the clear presentation of the material, the ability to motivate learners, the ability to demonstrate the relevance of the material taught and the ability to be enthusiastic in teaching. In another variant, Reischmann (2017, p. 48) considers that an andragog (a person who is trained in adult education) requires the possession of skills in: teaching; projection-organization; counseling; evaluation, research.

#### **4. The personalization of learning**

Personalized learning offers each student the opportunity to study effectively and efficiently, depending on the activation of their own skills (knowledge, abilities), being focused on it (Wozniak, 2020).

By differentiating training, reality is conceived starting from the actors of education, from the identification of meanings and their interpretation, from the way in which people (students, first of all) assume or not the meaning of a reality that they build together with their teachers, a common reality, which changes them generatively. The goal is to personalize learning and develop educational autonomy. It is a constructivist way of conceiving and using training which, in working with adults, is necessary and possible to achieve (Siebert, 2001; Chan, 2010).

The diversification of the learning situations can be described based on the following coordinates: the assurance of the chances of access to knowledge; the individualization of learning/adapting to the dominant characteristics of each of us

and of the age; the observance of individual opinions, styles, work rhythms; the stimulation of initiative, individual or groups creativity; the observance of specific values and needs.

Very interesting is the aspect of the variability of lifelong learning, which includes from the planned circumstances outside of us, to what actually happens in life, teaching us desired or unwanted lessons (Reischmann, 2017). Also, as we have previously shown, important for the success of the training program is the commitment of the students, the development of their motivation and desire for self-realization (Chametzky, 2014).

### **5. Some results in the training of pre-university teachers**

Through the teachers who work in universities and who have expertise in the field of continuing teacher training, it is possible to complete the independent individual education, through a specialized support, by resorting to the systematic, scientific, updated approach of the curriculum of such training, by exchanging experience with the beneficiaries.

In our country, the continuing training of teachers includes two components: professional development and career development. Continuing education is both a right and an obligation, and the teaching staff, as well as the management, guidance and control staff in pre-university education are obliged to participate, periodically, in continuing education programs, so as to accumulate, at every interval 5 years consecutively, a minimum of 90 transferable professional credits.

The model of continuing training is that of the skills approach, and the assessment is based on: the ability of the teachers to mobilize skills, in line with the evolution of the national curriculum and educational needs, to cope with change, complex situations, as well as crisis situations.

In the development of training programs, priority is given to a modular organization of the content. The module represents a coherent training system, which involves a system of assumed educational skills, for a period of time (a number of hours, either compact or fragmented), related to a series of contents, methodologies which is completed through an evaluation.

The elaboration and development of the continuing training programs for teachers is connected to the requirements of the Romanian education, regarding the promotion of the education focused on the educated person, by establishing training routes, depending on the needs of the educated, by correlating the aims with the modern trends in education and training, with the social expectations in a continuous dynamic.

In the pandemic period caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, in the case of continuing education, Botnariuc *et al.* (2020, p. 24), showed that training and courses were not the most important support for online teaching activities, but the advice provided by more experienced colleagues, the good practices shared by them, the tutorials found on the Internet. The manifestation of confidence in the role of adult education, in the case of vulnerable social systems, is found in Lopes and McKay, in 2020.

An example of the needs identified by the beneficiaries of the training programs for the second degree, at a university in the south-west of Oltenia region, Romania, includes the following aspects validated by teachers with an average of 11-year experience in the field (from 6 years to 16 years):

- Completing insufficient information on innovative trends necessary for professional development;
- Preventing or ameliorating some difficulties in choosing appropriate approaches regarding the design, management and evaluation of the educational process, in general, and of the educational process, in particular;
- Identifying solutions to solve various pedagogical situations, by integrating the multiple existing interpretations (trainers, colleagues, own conception, etc.).

Teachers specializing in language teaching, who participated, in 2021, in a training program, responded that, to capitalize on education in continuing vocational training, the contexts they choose are formal, non-formal and informal/ personal.

However, the continuing training of teachers is not a process in itself, without difficulties. There are many factors involved, including resistance to change (Anghelache, 2012), personal differences in the perception of the relevance of continuing training. The existence of some strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and impediments is highlighted by us, in Table no. 1, in which, by applying the questionnaire-based survey, we synthesized a SWOT analysis of the training programs for obtaining teaching degrees.

**Table 1. The SWOT analysis of the training programs for obtaining teaching degrees**

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<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The existence of a concordance with the thematic and the formal requirements regarding the support of the didactic degrees;</li><li>2. Proposing flexible, coherent, unitary, pragmatic continuing training programs, focused on capitalizing on teaching experience;</li><li>3. The use of training strategies based on the principles of andragogy;</li><li>4. The recruitment of competent trainers, with experience in the realization and implementation of continuing training programs;</li><li>5. The valorization of some content resources and of some topical/ relevant materials for the scientific information included in the program;</li><li>6. Ensuring the possibilities of adapting to the needs and requests of the students;</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The existence of pessimistic perspectives regarding the training of the pre-university education staff through continuing training courses.</li></ol>

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7. Stimulating and supporting the learning effort through teachers and other participants;
  8. Removing pessimistic attitudes, emotions and negative fears, which sometimes inevitably occur in situations prior to examinations.
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#### **Opportunities**

1. Stipulating the possibilities for training skills for career development in national legislation;
  2. The manifestation of the teachers' interest for continuing training through accredited programs;
  3. The existence of a significant number of teachers who express their concern and safety needs in terms of acquiring professional skills or the need for success in assessment.
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#### **Weaknesses**

1. The existence of a relatively small number of training programs of the same nature;
  2. The concurrent manifestation of some professional tasks;
  3. The existence of logistical insecurity related to travel or time constraints allocated to learning.
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#### **Discussions:**

a) The existence of some pessimistic perspectives on the training of the pre-university education staff, through preparatory courses for their teaching degrees exams is a phenomenon determined by the contemporary social realities, but there must be identified some solutions to adopt a realistic, constructive perspective, through well-founded options.

b) The identification of a relatively small number of training programs of the same type, at regional or national level, is a confirmation of the opportunity of these programs. They respond to the practical, intrinsic need for a successful preparation of the exams, but also for institutional ones, for certification through transferable professional credits of continuing training.

c) The competition of some professional or family tasks and the limitations of time allocated to learning can be prevented by organizing training sessions during the weekends, on Saturdays and Sundays or during the school holidays. It is known that the staged learning during the training program reduces the time given to learning under pressure in the pre-assessment stage, diminishes the stress effect and contributes to the stability/durability of the results.

The requirements for developing adult training programs (Sacaliuc, 2012, pp. 40-42) include:

- the orientation of training towards concrete tasks;
- the knowledge of the level of previous training of the students;
- the integration of knowledge into the existing experience;
- offering opportunities for practical practice, decision making;
- the use of problem-solving learning;
- the use of feedback;
- the capitalization on interactive contexts.

In addition to the same directions, it is shown that, apart from feedback, debriefing is necessary, that is, giving up ideas, old patterns, being aware of the fact that there are several types of participants, including difficult students (The Association for the Development of Social and Educational Services Catharsis, 2015).

## **6. Instead of conclusions**

Although, 20 years ago, the expectations towards adult education were insufficiently structured (Schifirnet, 2001), it remains valid that, in the future, the number of the institutions that consider adult education a primary activity will increase. In this regard, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) identifies opportunities in adult learning and education to help address social, economic and environmental issues.

Viable in the past, but also in the present, are the forms of part-time, blended-learning and distance education, as well as the continuation of training after adulthood.

Worth noting are the main methods useful in the field of continuing education, such as: simulations, case studies, computer-assisted or technology-assisted training, mutual training (Thompson and Deis, 2004).

The pedagogical theory of distance learning was initially based, in the 1910s, in the United States, on correspondence study, but today, the methodology and means are primarily supported by audio-video and internet technologies, which created new opportunities (Ceobanu *et al.*, 2020).

The particularities of distance learners are given by the fact that: the aims and objectives of learning are clearly established; the development of the study takes place at the same time with other activities; there is a heterogeneity of motivations (from the desire to train, to that of obtaining a diploma); it can lead to isolation (which can lead to the absence of competition); there is still a need to adapt to the virtual atmosphere of the course; autonomous and personal learning is applied. In general, the students being adults, have a richer life experience and, although they do not learn systematically, they are motivated from a practical, professional point of view. The profile of the students refers to the identification of elements related to: demographic factors, learning motivation, educational process, essential personal characteristics, necessary resources (Sava, 2003).

Concerns about the specifics of education in old age continue the ones related to adult education, the elderly becoming, over time, “an increasingly visible category” (Neculau, 2004, pp. 60-62). The continuation of activities seems to be “the main condition of a successful old age, and the level of studies and their continuation, a condition of optimization” (idem, p. 61), for an active (Ala-Mitka *et al.*, 2008) and successful aging process (Gingold, 1999).

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