

## Problems of Quality in Adult Learning

Tinatin KUBLASHVILI\*

### Abstract

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, new problems arose in almost every field of life. Priority was given to contemporary educational systems, needed to improve social conditions by following developments in the world;

- developing and re-organizing cultural life;
- changing to democratic values and free market economy;
- connecting with neighbors and other countries of the world effectively.

Successful development of any ongoing process depends on the education sector reforms providing in the context of the Bologna Process. Fostering the human resources became central issue of reforms. Georgia needs further development of academic freedom, and mobility; extension of the international partnership programs for scholars, students and education managers to promote education, information and communication of developed technologies in the region.

The old educational methods have damaged the greatest part of learners, so called Adults, who have not been taught how to apply and demonstrate their knowledge in real life. Nowadays, the Bologna Process pays a great attention at life-long learning, which will help these adults to fill the gaps in their knowledge and find themselves in the sphere of their specialization.

Although adjustment for older students sometimes progresses very smoothly, it is often extremely difficult. This paper is about searching several ways to support adults learning and stress on most appropriate methods to help to make this process easier.

**Key Words:** Contemporary Educational Systems; Bologna Process; Developed Technologies.

### Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, new problems arose in almost every field of life. Priority is given to Contemporary educational systems, which are needed to follow arranging social life by following developments in the world; developing and re-organizing cultural life; changing to democratic values and free market economy; connecting with neighbors and other countries of the world effectively.

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The stereotyped image of the university student as one who is 18-23 years old in residential, full-time study is being challenged by a new reality.

The world economy is now information-driven, and employability has become an increasingly important credential in the marketplace, both for new entrants into the labor force and those already employed.

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\* Assoc. Prof.Dr. International Black Sea University.Georgia

Adults returning to education display a marked difference among themselves. Some may be homemakers who interrupted their studies to raise children; others may be retired business executives who want to pursue work in fields that always interested them. They may have excellent prior academic backgrounds, or they may have fulfilled minimum requirements for admission. They also may come with or without the academic skills that most faculty members expect.

Adults in higher education experience self-consciousness and anxiety about their age and performance. They may feel more obligations to please the instructor than younger students do. They may seek more reassurance from instructors, and they may need to verbalize more than younger students do. On the other hand, older students may be more impatient with activities that they feel are not useful in their learning. Although adjustment for older students sometimes progresses very smoothly, it is often extremely difficult.

We aim to provide help and support to anyone who is thinking about or returning to the world of adult learning, and stress most appropriate methods to help to make this process easier.

*Since teaching adults is different from teaching normal students we avoid to call them „students” and use the term „participants”, also instead of „teachers” we use „instructors”.*

### **ADULTS AS LEARNERS**

Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. Despite the apparent truth, adult learning is a relatively new area of study. The field of adult learning was pioneered by Malcom Knowles. He identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

- ! Adults are **autonomous** and **self-directed**. They need to be free to direct themselves. Their instructors (teachers) must actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. Specifically, they must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. They should allow the participants to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. They have to be sure to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. Finally, they must show participants how the class will help them reach their goals (e.g., via a personal goals sheet). The adult learner is primarily in charge of his or her own learning. Instructors do not have the power to implant ideas or to transfer skills directly to the learner. They can only suggest or guide. An instructor's primary responsibility is to do a good job of managing.
- ! Adults have accumulated a foundation of **life experiences** and **knowledge** that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base.
- ! Adults are **goal-oriented**. The student should know what is the clear goal he/she wants to attain, and create their working plan. This classification of goals and course objectives must be done early in the course.
- ! Adults are **relevancy-oriented**. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests.
- ! Adults are **practical**, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job.
- ! As do all learners, adults need to be shown **respect**. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.

- ! Adults have **barriers**. Unlike children and teenagers, adults have many responsibilities that they must balance against the demands of learning. Because of these responsibilities, adults have *barriers against participating in learning*. Some of these barriers include lack of time, money, confidence, or interest, lack of information about opportunities to learn, scheduling problems, problems with child care and transportation.

Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best.

Adults differ from children as learners. An adult has assumed responsibility for himself/herself and others. Adults differ specifically in self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, time perspective, and orientation to learning.

The following chart identifies some key differences between children and adults as learners:

### Child and Adult Learning Characteristics

Children	Adults
Rely on others to decide what is important to be learned.	Decide for themselves what is important to be learned.
Accept the information being presented at face value.	Need to validate the information based on their beliefs and values.
Expect what they are learning to be useful in their long-term future.	Expect what they are learning to be immediately useful.
Have little or no experience upon which to draw, are relatively "blank slates."	Have substantial experience upon which to draw. May have fixed viewpoints.
Little ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to teacher or fellow classmates.	Significant ability to serve as a knowledgeable resource to the trainer and fellow learners.

There is one more thing that practically can be used only by adults and it is new, interesting term in Educational Psychology – called **metacognition**.

*Metacognition* defines the ability to think about thinking, to be consciously aware of ourselves as problem solvers, and to monitor and control our mental processing. **When we think about how we think, we can reflect on our learning styles, what methods and techniques work best for us, and how we've successfully learned in the past.**

Many researches tell us that metacognition is probably the most important lifelong learning skill. **Incorporating these skills into educational programs (and our day-to-day work habits) is vital to our growth. While topic-specific knowledge and skills are essential to expertise, programs must also be metacognitively aware, informed, and explicit.**

### METHODS OF ADULT LEARNING

- ! **Adults are people with years of experience and a wealth of information.** The instructors should focus on the strengths learners bring to the classroom, not just gaps in their knowledge; provide opportunities for dialogue within the group; tap their experience as a major source of enrichment to the class. Students can be resources to the instructor and to each other.

- ! **Adults have established values, beliefs and opinions.** The instructors should demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, religions, value systems and lifestyles; let their learners know that they are entitled to their values, beliefs and opinions, but that everyone in the room may not share their beliefs; allow debate and challenge of ideas.
- ! **Adults are people whose style and pace of learning has probably changed.** As most adults prefer teaching methods other than lecture, the instructors use a variety of teaching strategies such as small group problem solving and discussion.
- ! **Adults relate new knowledge and information to previously learned information and experiences.** The instructors should assess the specific learning needs of their audience before the class or at the beginning of the class. Present single concepts and focus on application of concepts to relevant practical situations.
- ! **Adults have pride.** The instructors should support the students as individuals. Self-esteem and ego are at risk in a classroom environment that is not perceived as safe or supportive. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. The instructor should also allow people to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions; acknowledge or thank students for their responses and questions; treat all questions and comments with respect; avoid saying "I just covered that" when someone asks a repetitive question. The famous saying is: "The only foolish question is the unasked question."
- ! **Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.** The instructors should engage the students in a process of mutual inquiry; avoid merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total agreement.
- ! **Adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning.** The instructors should emphasize how learning can be applied in a practical setting. Use case studies, problem solving groups, and participatory activities to enhance learning. Adults generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations.
- ! **Adults need motivation for learning.** The best way to motivate adult learners is simply to *enhance* their reasons for enrolling and *decrease* the barriers. Then the instructors must plan their motivating strategies. A successful strategy includes showing adult learners the relationship between training and an expected promotion.

Taking all abovementioned information into consideration, several "laws" have been pointed out in order to get high quality in adult learning:

1. **Set a feeling or tone for the lesson.** Instructors should try to establish a friendly, open atmosphere that shows the participants they will help them learn.
2. **Students do not wish to learn what they will never use.** The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable.
3. **Set an appropriate level of concern.** The level of tension must be adjusted to meet the level of importance of the objective. If the material has a high level of importance, a higher level of tension/stress should be established in the class. However, people learn best under low to moderate stress; if the stress is too high, it becomes a barrier to learning.
4. **Set an appropriate level of difficulty.** The degree of difficulty should be set high enough to challenge participants but not so high that they become frustrated by information overload. The instruction should predict and reward participation, culminating in success.

5. **Set the right and clear direction** through sharing experiences. Adults bring a great deal of life experience into the classroom, an invaluable asset to be acknowledged, tapped and used. Adults can learn well -and much - from dialogue with respected peers. New knowledge has to be integrated with previous knowledge; students must actively participate in the learning experience. The learner is dependent on the instructor for confirming feedback on skill practice; the instructor is dependent on the learner for feedback about curriculum and in-class performance. The key to the instructor role is control. The instructor must balance the presentation of new material, debate and discussion, sharing of relevant student experiences. The instructors are leaders, not dictators. They do have responsibility to make decisions, provide guidance and be a resource for the students' learning.
6. **Feedback.** Participants need specific knowledge of their learning results (feedback). Feedback must be specific, not general.
7. **Finally,** the participant must be **interested** in the subject. Interest is directly related to reward (any kind of reward). Adults must see the benefit (any kind of benefit) of learning in order to motivate themselves to learn the subject.

Adult education is substantial and carries great potential for success. That success, however, requires a greater responsibility by the educator. We need to be aware of learners' attitudes, past experiences, interests, habits, opinions and cultures. We need to understand their perspectives and be able to help them discover how useful the new teaching and learning methods can be for them. We need to engage them in the learning process and help them achieve their precisely defined expectations. If we can show them how our programs can benefit them practically, they will perform better and the benefits will last longer. Educators must remember that learning occurs within each individual as a continual process throughout life. People learn at different speeds, so it is natural for them to be anxious or nervous when faced with a learning situation. The most important things that can be done by the instructor in order to enhance learning is:

- ! Creating an environment where students feel safe and supported, where individual needs and ideas are honored, where abilities and life achievements are acknowledged and respected.
- ! An environment that fosters intellectual freedom and encourages experimentation and creativity.
- ! An environment where faculty treats adult students as peers--accepted and respected as intelligent experienced adults whose opinions are listened to, honored, appreciated. Such faculty members often comment that they learn as much from their students as the students learn from them.
- ! Active involvement in learning, as opposed to passively listening to lectures. Where students and instructors interact and dialogue, where students try out new ideas in the workplace, where exercises and experiences are used to bolster facts and theory, adults grow more.
- ! Supporting self-directed learning for adults. As the facilitator and catalyst for participants' learning, the instructor should make it possible for learning to happen by designing and performing all the activities that the learning processes requires.
- ! Learning results from stimulation of senses .Instructors should present materials that stimulates as many senses as possible in order to increase their chance of teaching success.
- ! Regular feedback mechanisms for students to tell faculty what works best for them and what they want and need to learn--and faculty who hear and make changes based on student input.

## Conclusion

Since the practice of adult learning is relatively new for Georgian educational system, our suggestion would be to stress on the importance of teaching characteristics mentioned above. It would be better to separate the groups of adult learners from the group of normal students and offer them different curricula with different course contents. This process needs much more time effort and resources, but the feedback received from adult learners can be considered vital to the university. We believe that a successful university is the one who is able to teach the ones with prior experience and established values, modifying mislead perceptions and values left over from the old educational system.

Opportunities to learn continue throughout life. High-quality vocational learning and qualifications are the key to developing the country's workforce.

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