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### **Competencies in Adult Education. Where Do We Stand?**

**Abstract:** Society has changed and so have adult education and adult educators' competencies. The author discusses the concept of (professional) competence arguing that skills, knowledge and attitude unite in a competence when related to performance in a real professional context. She claims that similar to projects and in tune with changes, competencies are not stable. She goes on discussing relations between adult learners, adult educators, society and culture shaping adult educators' competencies. Since one of the dilemmas in adult education is the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and professional knowledge, she is concerned with the issue of professionalism and professional competencies in adult education.

**Key words:** professional competency, professionalism, skills, knowledge, attitude, adult educator, adult education, culture, adult education programme

#### **Introduction**

When I was first invited to discuss the concept of competence (lat. *competio*) in adult education I had a dilemma: competencies or culture of adult educators? <sup>1</sup> Competencies appeared to me like old wine in a new bottle. Actually, the issue of competencies truly is old wine in a new bottle, since *knowledge, professional skills and attitudes* displayed by those dealing with adult education, their ability to motivate adults to go on learning, have always been decisive for the destiny of the learners and professional success of adult education.

Reflecting upon the concept of competence I first got inspired by theories of generative linguistics, particularly the concept as it was defined by Noam Chomsky who contrasted *competence* with *performance*. He defined linguistic competence (the ability to shape thoughts) as opposed to performance, the expression of thoughts. *A competence means being able to perform in a given context.*

In cognitive psychology competence means what could ideally be done with its help.

Peter Jarvis (1990, p.72) defines competency as a level of knowledge and skills and attitude needed to be attained for successful work according to professional standards.

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A consensus should be reached as to what a competency is and which basic professional competencies adult educators need today.

### **(1) Relations between adult learners, adult educators and society shaping adult educators' competencies**

It has been generally admitted that adult education is to be responsive to both individual and social changes (Findeisen, 2004). Thus one of the basic competencies in adult education is *adapting to changing circumstances*.

Over the last thirty years the *learner audiences* have changed due to demographic developments: migration, demographic ageing, the ageing of labour force, shrinking of the labour force and the advent of information society. In addition, sources of knowledge have multiplied and adult audiences have become more informed. Low educated functionally illiterate and audiences with specific learning needs have got access to adult education. *Understanding the adult learners and audiences* is one of the basic competencies an adult educator acquires and improves whenever confronted with them.<sup>2</sup>

New issues like environmental and health issues have gained importance in adult education, very much like management, economy and new technologies. New fields of activity, such as educational counselling, guidance, supervision and coaching were added.

Adult educators are being required to create learning situations in tune with the learners' needs, wishes, aspirations as well as expectations, the groups of learners being ever more heterogeneous and individual learners ever more self-directed. But adult educators are also required to adapt the methods to the learning situations as well as the epistemological status of different kinds of knowledge. (Charlot, 1977)

More learner-focused methods, new methods, and a combination of different learning locations and learning methods have been gaining importance.

Adult educators should be trained to use dialogue and discussion as the royal methods in adult education, as well as other methods enabling *reciprocal* and *mutual learning*. Dialogue and discussion make it possible for adult educators to adapt themselves to learners, thus getting aware of both how the learners learn and what they learn. The educators on the other hand learn to what extent their work has been a valuable investment and also how much they themselves have learned from their learners. Learners' searching and their attempts to understand are a good source for educators to learn. Adult educators should have a critical attitude towards themselves, taking into account their field experience and the results of their observation. Adult educators should act as learners. According to Knowels (1990, p.43) each adult learner in their speciality know what adult educators do not know. Therefore adult learning should be in actually peer learning.

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<sup>2</sup> Being involved in older adult education means understanding older learners' past, present and future and the need to create social ties.

Adult educators should be able to stimulate and experience reciprocal learning. First educators think about communicating knowledge and how to help learners to learn, and second they get possibility to enrich their knowledge by opening up a social debate. Learners are then invited to discuss a piece of knowledge, to question their educators, to react, to oppose them, to express their surprise, while educators react, reflect, even more, educators learn. Each individual in a group of learners may perform an act of teaching.

Lindeman (1926) argues that one of the major differences between traditional education and education of adults is in the process of learning. Managing such this specific process is a basic competence adult educators should have.

Adult learners *are not aware of the knowledge they have*. They know without knowing, though hidden knowledge does influence their opinion. It has become part of their representations. Adult educators' task and competence is to clarify whether the adult learner's knowledge is valid, or less valid or not valid at all. An adult educator critically helps the adult student to put order into his or her representations. Questions are being put and knowledge is being questioned against the background of what the learners have learned informally through life phenomena and events. Consequently, an adult learner determines the direction of his or her learning. When adult learner's knowledge has been identified it is up to the adult educator to confront it with scientific theoretical knowledge, elements of knowledge that have to be acquired.

Knowing is about being capable of thinking on one's own and it is not reproducing other people's thoughts. The famous text by Imanuel Kant »Was ist Enlightenment« issued in Berlinische Monatsschrift in December 1784, argues that a man can be liberated of his minority state of his self-imposed non-age, of his the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment. Knowing how to think, means to be inventive, creative, to construct the understanding of one's own life and story. *The adult educator has to be a guide, a guarantee that the learners' thinking and learning direction are the right ones.*

The same is true of other types of professional activities. Management staff, for example, has to be aware of the great variety of organisational formats and different approaches that can be applied. They have to deal with changing contexts like the decline / increase in government spending on adult learning and they have to reflect the aims of their organisation in the light of the needs of their target groups / learners.

Complexity and diversity also characterise the task profile of administrative staff who cooperate with trainers, programme planners and management, acting as an interface between their institution and its users.

Against this background adult education calls for *professionalization* which means both, constructing and developing competencies that are indispensable for working in adult education. Competencies encompass knowledge drawn from different disciplines and various other resources. *The process of professionalization implies bringing together a number of those who need a certain amount of knowledge, skills and who need to acquire an appropriate attitude towards their profession.*

### **(3) Professionalization, professional competencies and their dimensions**

Professionalization means the development and construction of competencies needed for professional work. In already institutionalised professions competencies encompass knowledge from different disciplines and different resources, but university is a place of frictions and tensions! On one hand there is scientific knowledge pertaining to the university's mission (the advancement of knowledge) and on the other hand there is professional logic imposed by the need to form highly professionalised people from very specific sectors of activity.

Professionalization of adult education is about mobilising those who need a certain amount of knowledge, a certain amount of know-how and an appropriate ethical attitude towards the professions of adult education.

Professionalization means that a professional can perform.

It means having a somehow common way of dealing and coping with situations. Actually, professionalism is a common culture constituting a sort of code of a professional group, expressing its values, attitudes and representations.

It also means that the knowledge gained is transferrable, that practical knowledge can be gained in a professional course.

Professionalization means a kind of rationalism of the processes of work, making visible for different audiences the tacit knowledge practitioners have. Formalising knowledge makes possible the acquisition in the process of instruction.

Further, professionalization means that the profession is recognised by society and it means qualities that are complex and difficult to acquire.

Sociology of professions used to advance a hypothesis that professionalization is somehow a copy of the models offered by the established professions.

Formalising knowledge makes possible its acquisition in the process of instruction whereas for contemporary sociologists of professions professionalization is not necessary applying the ideal professional norms. On the contrary, professionalisation is a dynamic changing strategy. The dynamic vision of processes does not mean that the process can be performed by just any group.

Professionalization means also constructing social identity, the formalisation of practice has to be accompanied by a constant struggle for the social recognition of regional levels.

#### About professional competencies

Let me use a metaphor to the issue of competency. "Suppose you are greedy, you want to make more money. You start studying economics in order to get some day to the Golden city, the city of Eldorado. The job here is to learn walking (skills). You go to the mountains and you walk for hours. You walk in circles, you are even good at walking in circles. But the mountains are full of roots, they are elaborate and just walking is not enough. What to do you do, you cannot walk anymore? You stop, you look around, you study the soil from geological and other points of view, you read a map, you compare ". You use resources in a given context! "And after consulting a map you walk again searching for the right direction. You are tired that's too much. At that moment you have reached a peak. But have you reached Eldorado? The answer is "no". At the same moment you see another peak... and you are not getting to Eldorado, but you have changed. You have acquired a different attitude.

This is what competent adult educators do to the learners. This is what they should be capable of doing... they should confuse their students, depress them about the validity of their knowledge, animate them, baffle them... enlighten them, inspire them, make them ask questions, contribute illustrations, think, relate their knowledge to their everyday life, shortly: change them.

There is a huge difference between having skills and competencies. To illustrate this point: A brick layer does not have competencies if he can build walls, but he is skilled. He becomes competent, if he is capable of *theorising from his experience and other sources of knowledge*, if he is capable of *applying skills and knowledge in a professional situation within professional activities*.

At first sight skills may be considered as a less complex, more simple than competencies. But the level of complexity is not a distinguishing feature between them. Skills and knowledge can be all more or less complex but competencies necessarily require to be used in *real professional contexts* and situations. Not just a context that can be simulated, not just a context with a limited number of variables.

*A competent professional is able to interpret the requirements and limitations of real professional situations and is able to combine different resources in a pertinent and efficient way.*

*A competence is not about applying skills, knowledge and attitude. On the contrary it is about constructing.*

Competent professionals draw their knowledge and skills from different resources. They themselves are not the only resource. A resource can be their colleagues, a

professional network, a film, a newspaper article. In accordance with professional standards, they utilise different resources channelling them towards set targets

It has been shown that *disciplinary knowledge* can influence adult teaching. It definitely has an influence on the choice of contents and activities, planning of aims, the nature of illustrations, the linking of teaching with learners' everyday life, on devising evaluation etc. Moreover, *a competence is not stable it is more a project*.

### Dimensions of competencies

Adult educators should be able *to trigger their learners' significant learning*. In order to be transmitters of culture, adult educators have to activate their, what I call "secondary culture" the type of culture stemming from their entire life (Zakhartchouk 1999). *Disciplinary knowledge* should be activated, though a compilation of disciplinary knowledge does not necessarily mean understanding the discipline, nor does it mean that learning can be stimulated in this way. Piling up bricks does not make a house, in the same way *a compilation of disciplinary knowledge does not trigger learning*.

*If they are not authors of the educational programme adult educators should get familiar with in entirety before they start teaching*. Namely if they are not familiar with it, they have a tendency to put a greater emphasise on their learners' individual learning. They limit the learners' questions. Or they are the only one who talks.

It goes without saying that adult educators should have a larger comprehension of andragogy and a larger comprehension of their discipline, larger than what they have to teach. Their understanding goes beyond piling up facts. These facts have to be structured and structuring as to enable adult learners to operate the linking of knowledge with their own hidden knowledge and life.

Adult educators should have the ability to establish a critical distance towards the contents and the elements of knowledge to be taught. They should bear in mind the context in which knowledge will be used. Moreover knowledge has to be grounded in sciences and social contexts change. Consequently, a critical distance towards the discipline is needed. Adult educators are not simple, neutral transmitters of knowledge. In the real context of a group of learners they have to create learning situations for learners to become owners of knowledge and skills to be employed in a variety of situations. Adult educators are supposed to establish links between the »secondary culture« and the learners' individual culture. Though the teaching should be centred in the learners' needs it should not be closed to the world around them. Adult educators are cultural mediators (Zakhartchouk, 1999). Adult educators should use what their learners know and what their everyday life is in order to motivate them. They should draw their learners' attention to economic, historic, social and other dimensions of phenomena and events. Adult educators should transform their learning groups into a cultural open space constructing together with the learners common identity, values, know how, creating common

comprehension. The collective life of the learning group is an important resource of learning.

### **Adult educators' professional competencies**

In their professional work adult educators should

1. act professionally, respecting professional heritage and tradition. They should be critical interpreters of knowledge and various cultures, adult educators should create a link between their own culture and their learners' culture;
2. be themselves engaged in permanent learning; if adult educators lack disciplinary knowledge they are not in a position to help learners establish links between pieces of knowledge;
3. have the ability to use information from different sources;
4. communicate clearly. Oral or written language they use within an array of professional and teaching contexts should be correct without mistakes and effective. They should listen to others, correctly interpret messages from others and respond appropriately; ask questions to clarify, and exhibit interest in having two-way communication; They should demonstrate openness in sharing information and keeping learners informed;
5. be able to devise learning situations for adult learners to learn the contents and develop the targeted competencies;
6. monitor teaching/learning situations from the point of view of the contents to be learned by the learners as well as competencies targeted by the educational programme;
7. be able to evaluate the progression of learning and the acquisition of competencies targeted by the programme;
8. plan, organise and supervise the group processes as to enable their learning and socialisation; use methods and time efficiently
9. adapt their interventions according to the tacit knowledge of learners and their (specific) characteristics;
10. integrate new technologies into different phases (preparation, monitoring, managing education and professional development);
11. cooperate with the team of adult educators and staff being respectful of the mission of their institution. They should work collaboratively with colleagues to achieve organizational goals;
12. they should solicit input by genuinely valuing others ideas and expertise; they should be willing to learn from others and place team agenda before personal agenda; take part in processes of individual and collective development;
13. display an ethical attitude within their professional situations.

## Conclusion

In changing society *adult education staff have to adapt to changing circumstances*. New issues, new fields of activity, such as educational counselling, guidance, supervision and coaching have been introduced. The *learner audiences* have changed due to demographic developments... *Understanding the adult learners, their hidden knowledge and using it in the learning process* is one of the basic competencies an adult educator has to acquire and improve whenever confronted with them.<sup>3</sup>

More learner focused methods, new methods, and a combination of different learning locations and learning methods have been gaining in importance.

Adult educators should be trained to use dialogue as the royal method in adult education, as well as other methods enabling *reciprocal* and *mutual learning*. Dialogue makes it possible for adult educators to adapt themselves to learners, thus getting aware about how the learners learn and what they learn. There is a double questioning present in dialogue, the educators learning how much their work has been a valuable investment and also how much they themselves have learned from learners. Learners' searching and their tentative to understand are a good source for educators to learn. Adult educators should have a critical attitude towards themselves, taking into account their field experience and their observation. Adult educators should act as learners. Each adult learner in their speciality know what adult educators do not know. Therefore adult learning should be learning of peers.

Adult educators should be able to stimulate and experience reciprocal learning. First educators think about communicating knowledge and how to help learners to learn, and second they get possibility to enrich their knowledge opening up a social debate. Learners are then invited to discuss a piece of knowledge, to question their educators, to react, to oppose them, to express their surprise, while educators react, reflect, even more, educators learn. Each individual in a group of learners may perform an act of teaching.

Lindeman argues that one of the major differences between traditional education and education of adults is in the process of learning. Managing this specific process is a basic competence adult educators should have.

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his or her learning. When adult learner's knowledge has been identified it is up to the adult educator to confront it with scientific theoretical knowledge, elements of knowledge that have to be acquired. The role and the competence of adult educator is to inform the adult learner about the answer to the questions asked. But this answer will have no impact on adult learners' knowledge if he or she does not search for it themselves. Learning is not waiting for knowledge to be poured in me. Offering formalised knowledge in adult education is *correlating the learners and teachers activities* and this is also one of the adult educators' competence.

*The adult educator has to be a guide, a guarantee that the learner's thinking and learning direction is the right one.*

The same is true of other types of professional activities. Management staff, for example, has to be aware of the great variety of organisational formats and of the different approaches that can be applied. They have to deal with changing contexts like the decline / increase in government spending on adult learning and they have to reflect the aims of their organisation in the light of the needs of their target groups / learners. Moreover it has to reflect the policy requirements concerning adult education.

Complexity and diversity also characterise the task profile of administrative staff who have to cooperate with trainers, programme planners and with the management, and who act as the interface between the institutions and its clients.

Against this background adult education calls for *professionalization* which means both, constructing and developing competencies that are indispensable for working in adult education. The competencies encompass (knowledge drawn from different disciplines and various resources. *The process of professionalization implies bringing together a number of those who need a certain amount of knowledge, skills and who need to acquire an appropriate attitude towards their profession.*

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