

Dušana Findeisen, PhD  
Slovenian Third Age University, National Association  
for Education and Social Inclusion

### **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 competence arguing that skills, knowledge and attitude get united in a competence on condition they are related to performance in real professional contexts. When in tune with changes, competencies are not stable. The author goes on discussing relations between adult learners, adult educators, society and culture that shape 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 as well as the process of professionalization in adult education.

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

#### **Introduction**

When first invited to discuss the concept of competence (Lat. *competitio*) in adult education I was faced with a dilemma: adult educators' competencies or culture? <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 or professional moral and values (Dürkheim, 1950)* <sup>2</sup> of 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, a primary inspiration was Noam Chomsky's theory in the field of generative linguistics. Namely, Chomsky contrasted *competence* with *performance*, opposing linguistic competence (the ability to shape thoughts) to performance (expressing thoughts). Consequently, having a *competence means being able to perform in a given context*. Competencies are always contextualised.

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<sup>1</sup> Findeisen, D. Competencies or culture of adult educators, this is now the question. In: 8th Adult Education Colloquium: Education and Training of Teachers in Adult Education, Ljubljana, 22.-23. October 2004

<sup>2</sup> Each profession has its own professional moral elaborated by groups of professionals "argues Dürkheim in Lessons of Sociology. "There is a moral of priests, soldiers, judges (Durkheim, 1950, p.67

Further, in cognitive psychology competence is what could ideally be done with its help.

Finally, Peter Jarvis (1990, p.72) defines competency as level of knowledge, skills and attitude needed for successfully performing tasks according to professional standards.

A consensus is still to 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 shape adult educators' competencies**

It has been generally admitted that adult education is 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 and ageing of the labour force and the advent of information society. In addition, sources of knowledge have been multiplied and adult audiences have become more informed and knowledgeable. Low educated functional illiterates and audiences with specific learning needs have got access to adult education. Therefore, *understanding the adult learners and adult learning audiences* is one of the basic competencies an adult educator acquires and improves when confronted with them.<sup>3</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 and expectations, the groups of learners being ever more diversified and individual learners ever more self-directed. But adult educators are also required to adapt their 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 are trained to use dialogue and discussion as methods of choice 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 their learners learn and what they have

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<sup>3</sup> Being involved in older adult education means understanding older learners' past, present and future and the need to create social ties.

learned.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously educators learn to what extent their efforts were worthy and how much they have learned from the learners. Learners' searching and their attempts to understand are for adult educators learning opportunities where adult educators act as learners. According to Knowles (1990, p.43) each adult learner in their speciality know what adult educators do not know. Thus adult learning is actually peer learning.

Lindeman (1926) 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 one of the adult educator's basic competencies.

Adult learners *are not aware of the knowledge they have*. They know without knowing, though hidden knowledge does influence their opinion and has been integrated in their representations. Thus, 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 put and knowledge is 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 that has to be acquired. *The adult educator has to be a guide, a guarantee that the learners' thinking and learning go in the right direction.*

The same is true of other types of professional activities in adult education. Management staff, for example, have to be aware of the great variety of organisational formats and different approaches that can be applied. They deal with changing contexts, they can be faced, for instance, with the decline / increase in government spending on adult learning or they have to mirror the mission 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 and skills and who need to acquire a moral attitude towards their profession.*

### **(3) Profession, professionalization, professional competencies and their dimensions**

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<sup>4</sup> I teach transactional analysis. At the beginning of each session I ask my older adult students which concepts from those they were supposed to learn the last time, they associate with their life situations and why. This is how I learn about what they have learned and also how they learn.

Opening up to the competition on commodity markets, European Union also started putting pressure on services and free circulation of labour force on the service market, often at the expense of the protection of the access to professional titles. (Evetts, 2008; Favereau 2008). The same evolution supported by the World Organisation of Commerce is being noticed worldwide. These organisations are trying to open up services to competition, considering professional work as any other type of service. Consequently professionals' power and working *autonomy* have diminished.

In society marked by individualisation, professionalism has a clear advantage: members of professional groups are highly attached to their organisations as well as their code of behaviour regulating their practices. Controlling their activities, these groups require their members to be qualified. In addition professional organisations are required to contribute to improving their members' competencies and respect of professional moral, though it is not clear to what extent they are successful in this process of professionalization.

Professionalization means that a professional can perform. Thus, professionalization stands for development and construction of competencies that are needed for professional work. In already institutionalised professions competencies encompass both knowledge drawn from different disciplines and professional knowledge from different resources. In universities, there is scientific knowledge pertaining to the advancement of knowledge and there is professional logic imposed by the need to form highly professionalised people from very specific sectors of activities. Universities educating future professionals are torn between two types of needs.

Professionalization of adult education is about mobilising those who need a certain amount of knowledge, a certain amount of know – how, and who need to develop professional moral and attitude towards the professions of adult education. Professionals should have a common culture, a sort of common code shared with a professional group, expressing its values, attitudes and representations.

It also means that the knowledge gained is transferrable. 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.

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

Formalising knowledge makes possible its acquisition through instruction whereas for contemporary sociologists of professions professionalization is not necessarily applying ideal professional norms. On the contrary, professionalization is a dynamic

changing strategy. Nevertheless, the dynamic vision of processes does not mean that they can be performed by just any group.

Professionalization is about constructing social identity.

#### *About professional competencies*

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 less complex, more simple than competencies. But the level of complexity is not their distinguishing characteristic. Skills and knowledge can be all more or less complex but competencies require to be used in *real professional contexts* and situations. Contexts that can be simulated, or contexts with a limited number of variables are not enough.

*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, professional networks, films, newspaper articles. In accordance with professional standards, they utilise different resources of knowledge and skills 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 designing 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 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 the authors of the educational programme, adult educators should get familiar with it in entirety before they start teaching.* Namely, if they are not familiar with it, they have a tendency to put a greater emphasis on their learners' individual learning. They limit the learners' questions, or they are the only ones who talk.

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 have to be 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 the changes of the social context. 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 the 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 on 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 offers 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 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; they should solicit input by genuinely valuing other people's 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;
12. display an ethical attitude within their professional situations.

## Conclusion

Piling up disciplinary knowledge does not trigger learning. Competencies encompass disciplinary knowledge and skills as well as knowledge drawn from various life phenomena and events and different sources. Competencies are always contextualized and related to performing.

One of the basic competencies adult educators have is to be able to adapt to changes and to monitor the learning process by using a variety of methods.

*Understanding the adult learners and adult learning audiences* is one of the basic competencies an adult educator should acquire and keep improving.

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 their method of choice 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 of how learners learn and what they have learned. Moreover, adult educators themselves should also act as learners. Each adult learner in their speciality know

what adult educators do not know. Therefore adult learning is the learning of peers. Each individual in a group of learners may perform an act of teaching.

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.

Adult learners *are not aware of the knowledge they have*. They know without knowing, though hidden knowledge influences their opinion. Adult educator's 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 put order into his or her representations. Offering formalised knowledge in adult education is about *correlating the learners and teachers' activities* which is also one of the adult educators' competencies.

In changing society *adult education staff have to adapt to changing circumstances*. New issues, new fields of activity have been introduced. The *learner audiences* have also 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 professions in adult education.*

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