

## The Reflective Dimension of Learning in Adulthood

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The field of adult education has undergone significant changes, both in terms of finality, content, and modalities. These changes have been generated, on the one hand, with the help of the findings made in adult research (for instance, with regard to the specificity of adult learning or the specific socio-cultural and professional behaviors of adult learners, their behavioral patterns being also formed by the set of values they hold, etc.) and, on the other hand, these changes have appeared due to the profound and unforeseeable transformations of our society, occurring at a fast pace.

The editors of the journal celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary have invited to reflections on the evolution of education sciences for the past 20 years at the national, European, and international levels. The adult education and lifelong learning and, in general, educational fields have experienced major changes of discourses, but, even more importantly, have produced significant developments. In adult education, these developments have generally responded to the increased expectations from adult education, as in our knowledge society and in our learning society, adults are expected not to be able to cope with all societal, professional, technological and other changes without being involved in continuous learning and constantly updating their knowledge. Thus, if we aim to increase the participation of adults in continuous learning (Sava, Nuisl, Lustrea, 2016), we need more structured information about the field of adult education, better monitoring of its latest developments and of the impact of services and provision in adult learning and education (ALE), more

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research to support better policy interventions and policy visions (Boeren 2019), and, finally, we need to advocate for the benefits of learning in adulthood (Sava, 2015).

Still at the national level, the authors of the article have managed to provide a substantial input in the scientific debate about ALE. Simona Sava, as a young scholar, had the opportunity to be coordinated by Professor Păun from her BA paper up until the defense of her PhD thesis. If for her BA thesis, the proposed title of "Trends and orientations in adult education" was chosen with a view to "checking the emerging field of adult education, quite poorly structured" (Păun), her further work, research and later developments have meant a significant contribution to ALE in Romania. Simona Sava has grounded her academic career in the field of adult education and she successfully set up a thriving research institute dedicated to adult education (The Romanian Institute for Adult Education – IREA), and managed to promote the Romanian research on adult education at the international level and to offer a better visibility and develop a more articulate discourse on adult education in Romania, advocating for the professionalization of the field (Sava 2012b). If the early collaboration between the first two generations of scholars represented by Emil Păun and Simona Sava resulted in a number of publications meant to give a general picture of the adult education in Romania (Păun , Sava, 2003), other more complex topics were further developed, such as the validation of competencies for adults, acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts (Sava, Lupou, 2008).

The topic of identifying, (self)evaluating and recognizing the acquisition of learning and the relevant competencies acquired in all life contexts is one of the most important developments in the field of ALE in less than the last 20 years, which is a viable solution for stimulating and documenting learning taking place everywhere, but also for articulating different learning and career paths for personal growth (Sava, 2012a). The close cooperation between the two authors of this article working on this goal resulted in important findings about the validation process, adapted to professionals working in ALE. The output of this research cooperation, the handbook for validating the pedagogic competences of ALPs (Sava, Lupou, 2008), was highly appreciated at the European and the

international levels. It has been translated into eight foreign languages and has been nominated as best practice in several European reports and publications.

The topic of how to foster and make visible the learning of adults became the research focus of dedicated scholars in the field of adult education. In this way, they were able to find new explanations to how adults learn and to how they can be more motivated to learn (Dumitru, 2007), becoming more aware of their learning and of the learning benefits.

The adult age is no longer defined in opposition to childhood and adolescence, but as a continuum on the temporal line and also on the psycho-social and cultural axes. The adult is approached or, better said, should be approached from multiple perspectives, as a psycho-social subject, defined by his/ her citizenship, and experiencing the epistemic, cultural, and professional dimensions of life. Generally, adults are expected to be able to learn, be motivated to learn, find their own interest for personal development and well-being (Lustrea, AlGhazi, Predescu, 2018), and be able to recognize the benefits of lifelong learning (Sava, 2015), while searching for new ways to valorize them for personal, professional and social development. All these complex aspects have led to a widening of the field of adult education, while, at the same time, they have caused a lot of inaccuracies and difficulties in defining adult education and its limitations in a precise and rigorous manner. Accepted for a long time in the "royal" field of formal education, adult education is currently making considerable efforts to recover and capitalize on non-formal and informal resources existing in society with the view to transforming them into valuable tools of education. The validation of competencies is one of the solutions, as the whole self-reflective process emphasized in this article is a basic precondition for a deep and relevant validation process. However, the validation of competencies is only one solution for which the reflection process can be used, while our arguments and main points in this article support a systematic reality, for which we have revised some of the major scientific contributions to the understanding of the reflective process and reflective learning and of how to foster it. We believe that mastering self-reflecting learning can help individuals to cope with the accelerated societal changes, but it can also be a prerequisite

for sustainable development (Boeren, 2019), irrespective of the different trends affecting the discourses on the importance and scope of ALE.

During this time period of twenty years, it can be also noticed a dramatic shift in the educational discourse, from the dominant humanist and cultural discourse to the utilitarian-pragmatic one. The former focused on equalitarian and compensatory goals (achieving equality in educational opportunities for disadvantaged adults) and on cultural aims (e.g. the education for the cultural valorization of our free time for achieving personal development, which has lately disappeared). This type of discourse is marginalized or rather completely ignored today. The "invasion" of the utilitarian-pragmatic discourse centered on profession and training is a factual reality that should not be rejected in itself, but only from the perspective of some of its rather limiting results, such as marketization and taylorization, etc. Among other things, this development is criticized, because it only rarely allows the use of reflective practices in learning. The reflective dimension of education and of general learning processes in adulthood is not enough evident.

### **Reflexivity and reflective practice**

Reflexivity is a polysemic term, sometimes with confusing meanings. The concepts of reflexivity and reflexive practice were first introduced by Schon in "The Reflective Practitioner" (1983). The theoretical premise of the analysis of reflexivity can be found in J. Dewey's conception, mentioned by Schon, among those who inspired him the most.

J. Dewey is one of the most prominent authors arguing for education as a reconstruction of experience. The central concept of Dewey's theory is that of experience, which he interprets in two different ways:

- the ontological meaning resulted from the interaction of the individual with the environment, assimilated as part of one's individual experience;
- the epistemological meaning, which involves a lot of thinking, reflection, the acquisition of new knowledge, and reconstruction.

The epistemological meaning mentioned above in relation to experience enabled Dewey to formulate his concept of "reflective thinking," developed later by Schon and his collaborators.

Education is a permanent process involving the reorganization and reconstruction of experience, which means that each current experience contains some of the previous lived experience, influencing therefore the quality of subsequent experiences. This is a process of "reconstructive transaction" that underpins the success of our actions in everyday life. But not every experience has an educational potential: "the central issue of an experience-based education is to choose the nature of experiences that can be a fertile and creative ground for later experiences," says Dewey (apud, Thievenez, 2017, p. 42).

The questioning of our adult experience is an important source of training and personal development. Recent research highlights that, in order for experience to be a significant source of training, it must provoke *l'etonnement* and incite the learner to embark on a process of personal questioning and answering. The role of trainers is that of identifying and/ or creating situations with a potential for "l'etonnement" (Thievenez, 2017, p. 42-43).

As a response to the sequential and rational and practice-based model of adult education, Schon developed the alternative model of the "reflexive practitioner" and reflexive supervision. Thus, he distinguishes between reflection-in-action (which means thinking ahead, analyzing, experiencing, and responding critically to the existing situations) and reflection-on-action, which is defined as "thinking through experiences, discussing, and engaging in reflective conversations" (Schon, 1983). For this, we need well-prepared tutors, mentors, trainers, who are able to systematically engage learners in stimulating discussions. But, current organizations, dominated by utilitarianism and focused only on achieving success, are less concerned with those reflexive processes focused on understanding, reflection, exploration, as Schon points out. In this way, Schon laid the foundation for the reflexivity theory, which he considers to be a cognitive activity, based on an epistemological scheme.

In very simple terms, "reflexivity is the ability to analyze one's own professional practices in order to transform them" (Păun, 2017, p. 187). The

reflective activity is a dialectic process in which there is an overlap between thought and action, between theory and practice, and it is a practice generating change. The articulation of theory and practice and the correspondence between the learning content and its practical application are essential aspects of reflective training practices. It is not important to acquire more knowledge but rather to filter it through deep processes of reflection. Reflexivity is an activity of analyzing your own practice in order to optimize it. This requires us to consider how practice is not only the place of application of theory, but it also receives a heuristic role, becoming a source of theoretical knowledge and practical realization. The critical-reflective questioning of practice and experience helps us to prevent them from becoming only normative sources, routine practices that are barriers to reflective thinking, a "reflexive mental state" (Senge, et al., 2016, p93). The heuristic and creative use of experience is one of the essential features of reflexivity.

Reflexivity implies, among other things, the critical analysis of one's own practices and actions, of the implicit values underlying them, and of the personal, social, institutional, and polemical contexts in which they are realized. This is all done from the perspective of the transformation of our practices and their improvement. The critical aspect of reflexivity does not only concern the solving of the problem but formulating it first. In reflective learning practices, solutions need not be borrowed from other places, but they must be explored beforehand. It is not only the solution that is important but also the path (or ways) chosen for dealing with that particular solution. In this way, reflexivity can become "reflexive expertise".

Reflexivity is not only limited to the rational part of an activity, but it extends to the emotional and artistic areas of practice, and also to the ethical understanding of our actions. In this case, reflexivity implies the analysis of the ethical justifications of our actions, a highly necessary analysis today when the mercantile spirit of neoliberalism is penetrating the educational space. An ethics of adult training is needed. The reflective dimension in adult education promotes a set of values, such as autonomy, collaboration, critical and constructive spirit, and many others. Autonomy means "apprendering to

pretend en charge" and is a standard criterion for personal development (Fritsch, 1971, p. 79). Collaboration is also a distinctive characteristic of adult behavior, whether during their training periods or in their day-to-day activities.

An important role in the introduction of reflective practices to the adult learner is played by reflexive trainers and practitioners. Therefore, the adult learning professionals (ALPs) themselves need to master such a reflexive competence. This is a highly necessary role they must play in our segregated societies, torn apart by radicalization, mistrust, migration and extremely complex situations difficult to cope with (Nuissl, Sava, 2018). First, the reflective ALPs should reflect on their own values, preferences, prejudices, biases, while approaching different topics, or when interacting with their adult students. The reflexive practitioner is what Descartes called "an open-minded practitioner," whose doubts determined him to avoid the canons of thought. If for the expert trainer, the source of his actions is the certainty, for the reflexive trainer, the source is mainly uncertainty and doubt (see also Beckers, 2007, p.275).

In principle, we must maintain a balance between the expert trainer (focused on the task to be performed, the learning content and the best methods of action) and the reflective one (centered on the psycho-social and personal processes of the adult learner). The Reflective Trainer or Practitioner is a facilitator who implements strategies of reflective support and assistance, including the emotional support, who helps the adult to solve the problems they face and to reflect retrospectively and prospectively. From the perspective of reflexivity, the relationship between the trainer and the adult must rely on socratic and heuristic methods, which can challenge the adult learner, offer him/ her guidance and encouragement.

### **The biographical approach-a way of stimulating reflexivity**

There are many ways to develop reflexivity: the reflective journal, the reflexive portfolio, the reflexive conversation, reflexive surveillance, reflexive self-evaluation, etc.

In this article, we will discuss one of the least used methods, even if it has a high reflexivity potential. This is the biographical approach, which is a reflection process that the adult goes through while reflecting on different moments in his/her life. It is what we commonly call the "life histories" of individuals. In the educational field, the biographical approach allows adults to discover themselves (an opportunity for their identity reconstruction) and to better understand its formative role. In the interpretation that the adult gives to his/her educational path, s/he develops a way of reflecting on the significance of this process for his/her evolution. This is a first step into the validation process, the most significant and demanding one for the adult (Sava, 2012a). In this way, the adult carries out a process of self-discovery that allows him or her to question their previous reflexive experiences and later transform them into new life experiences. To conclude, the biographical approach is a process of "reconfiguring the history of one's life," called by Mezirow "a transformational perspective" (Dominice, 2001, p. 287).

The biographical approach allows us to support adults to select a set of significant learning experiences from their formative course of actions, experiences that are known to be their educational biography. Educational biography (as life history) is represented by a set of educational experiences (related to one's family, school, profession) that highlight the dynamics of the training process as a "hermeneutical space of educational action" (Dominice, 2001, p.282). Educational biography is, in a sense, a confirmation of Dewey's conception of education as a reconstruction of experience, because it manages to direct the reflections of the adult learner within the space of their social evolution. "The processes that relate to the educational trajectory of an adult are not restricted only to the formally established spaces of education (schools, universities, professional traineeships and continuous training seminars" ... "these processes develop in a long time and in multiple social and private spaces", which allow us to overcome the "formal educational reality" (Baudouin, 2001, p281-282).

We conclude by saying that reflexivity helps us reconsider the adult learner as an individual and social subject and go back to the moment when the adult

emerged in the social field, just after R. Barthes's proclamation of "the death of the subject." This can be the starting point for a critical, open and reflexive society.

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