

EPALE Podcast

Adult learners and their educators

Transcript



Podcast Episode - LLLP

Andrea Lapegna (A): A warm welcome to our listeners. My name is Andrea and I will be your host for today for another EPALÉ podcast. This podcast is being organised by the Lifelong Learning Platform, which I represent, for EPALÉ, the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe. And I am thrilled today to say that we are going to discuss a topic that has gained a lot of importance lately in Europe: adult teachers and educators. So we know that these are difficult times for teachers and educators around the world, and in Europe in particular, poor working conditions, societal pressure to deliver time and other sorts of constraints prevent our teachers from saying that they have a fulfilling profession. And it's being harder and harder for institutions to attract professionals for teaching and educators in general. Even the European Commission's publications point at a grim picture and actually recommend Member States to do a little more to help our teachers. And this is specifically true for adult teachers or rather teachers and educators that work with adult learners because it's even nichier than regular teachers in formal education institutions, or they work with prevalence. So for these reasons, the episode today will focus on why educators play the bigger role in adult learning, and they should be kept in due consideration in all sorts of learning environments. We will delve into different learning environments in which educators operate - workplace learning and training is different from university, lifelong learning, for instance, and the competences educators need are radically different. So what is their pedagogical role? Any innovative practices or methodologies out there? Is training the trainer still a priority for us, or have we collectively let things slip? And I have not one, but two distinguished researchers with me today to kick start the conversation. So let me welcome Professor Regina Mulder, holder of the chair for pedagogy and educational science at the University of Regensburg. Welcome Regina.

Regina H. Mulder (R): Thank you very much.

A: And with us, we also have Doctor Maria Zaniós, Assistant Professor in educational and innovation, sorry, in Educational Innovation and Research at the Yukon Cyprus, welcome Maria.

Maria Kyriakidou Zeniou (M): Thank you very much for the opportunity.

A: So let me, let me start right with Regina. I wanted to ask you since this is part of your work. So, adult educators encompass a wide array of profiles. We're not only talking about teachers in the strictest sense, but really the whole spectrum of educators. Where do you see the most promising and innovative pedagogies?

R: Well, you're right. There is a large diversity in trainers and teachers when it comes to adult education and also in the topics that they are providing. They are working in different contexts and

also have different backgrounds. The diversity is very interesting, but it's also a challenge, I think. First of all, we need to understand that there is very little empirical evidence on what actually works and what they do. So we all have a lot of experiences, but the evidence is rather poor. I found that out in a study I did for the Dutch Education Council on organising workplace learning. And there you see that worldwide, the studies are very scattered. And that also goes for studies on teacher and trainer behavior, in particular.

When it comes to different backgrounds, you have, indeed, unqualified people that have a lot of knowledge - content knowledge on a specific product, for instance. And in addition, we fortunately also have a lot of qualified people with an education site, background pedagogy, but also job-specific aspects, such as health educators. So it's very difficult to say where most innovations are. You can find them anywhere. In formal institutions, also in universities, there are people that have a natural competency for providing very good education so they can develop (and they do) innovations in education. But obviously the people that are trained have a large array of skills and possibilities to develop innovations and put them into practice. So what all adult educated educators need is obviously content knowledge, but also the pedagogical competences such as knowing what the target group is, providing knowledge that fits to them and their needs, and understanding how people learn. And that learning is not only a cognitive process, but also an emotional and motivational process, and being able to carry that out into practice. So that's a large array of things that people need, that adult educators need to provide good quality training. So as I said, innovations. You can find them practically everywhere, but there's little connection between all the things going on in practice, I would say

A: Thank you very much. You really made a formidable point that new teachers might be well prepared when it comes to content, but the pedagogical knowledge of actually being a teacher and an educator, perhaps is lacking. And of course, we have a whole set of different pedagogies today with the digital revolution that's been quite high on the agenda, and up for discussion. And indeed, so this is, this is a hook for my next question to Maria: technology enhanced learning environments might pose challenges for adult learners, but also for other teachers and educators. How do we keep up with that? Are they equipped with the right skills and competences to deliver and stay on pace with the technological revolution?

M: Yes, thank you. It was the time, as we all remember, of the COVID pandemic, when we realised that technology enhanced learning and different learning is not just a matter of switching from face to face to online, but this would have to be a result of very careful planning and petabyte design so that we can have effective results. So when this problem became evident, then it was a question of: do we have the skills to provide this design? So first of all, it is the technical skills. As we speak, technological advances emerge and they are being developed. So people need to be the trainers, the adult educators need to be aware of the greater age of available resources and also be able to choose the most appropriate one. So for example, you might want to support your learning outcomes using a particular tool. For example, Mentimeter is quite effective in engaging

students in the real time teaching, but less effective in asynchronous mode teaching, in terms of asynchronous mode teaching, then you may want to spark reflection. And of course, always the engagement of learners is an issue. What we all discuss these days is the AI tools with chat GPT being the most recommendable. So one is to be aware of how to train the chat GPT agents for maximizing their effectiveness; one is to be aware of the ethical framework and the legal framework around which they can employ this tool in teaching and learning. But as Professor Mulder mentioned...Regina has mentioned the importance of pedagogy, so these pedagogic skills would have to allow and enable the adult educators to orchestrate those learning activities which are appropriate and meaningful, and to design the materials also that would support these activities.

Another issue is assessment, which, of course, has its role in adult learning as well as other forms of learning. And to go more deep (*sic*), one could think of cognitive load theory, multimedia learning theory, and they need to be able to see how these interventions affect processing in humans, and the longer consequences they have on learning. So it's not a simple thing to consider how to create those activities and how to create the materials, and just to finalise, to add the question and skills. For example, how do you engage students in problem solving within a technology and healthy learning environment? Because it's such a complex skill that includes moving through procedures. And the final thing that we have found in postgraduate education, and again, that's another point that I agree with Regina, that we have a lot of anecdotal evidence on adult education, but I think it also applies to when you train people. They would have to bring examples from their practical experience path to the workplace or even personal life. So one is to be able to navigate through ethical and professional issues in online learning, where students and participants need to be aware of the ethical implications of using this kind of discussion.

A: Yeah, very much true. And thank you very much for providing such rich details on technology enhanced environments. You seem to point at the issue of skills. So let me ask you a follow up question. Indeed, skills are, of course, important, but to develop skills, we might need a little bit more funding, resources, time, experts and whoever trains the trainers. Do you think it's only a question of funding, or there's more to it?

M: There is the question of funding, yes, but experience, of course, there's more to it. Because experience with research funding has given the conclusion that implementation and enactment are so very much needed in terms of taking those outcomes from the pattern learning projects and turn them into policies that would enhance people's lives, working lives, and would make a change in the culture of society so that they can truly embrace lifelong learning and skills development. So, yes, we definitely go beyond funding and beyond projects.

A: Yeah, that's also what I understood. I'm always happy to hear the mention of lifelong learning connected to adult learning and education, both from a personal and a professional point of view. Let me go back to Regina. So, we heard about the necessity to upskill and reskill adult teachers

and educators. And the EU is indeed placing a lot of efforts and focus on both upskilling and reskilling of the workforce in general, and this is especially true for the twin transitions, so the digital transition and the green transition; most of the initiatives that EU is putting into place are geared towards providing the workforce with the right skills for the economy; and this is also true for other teachers and adult educators. But do they have different needs? And what about them? Are we overlooking them?

R: Well, first of all, I'm very happy with a lot of things that Maria said. The focus on assessment, for instance, I think that's almost always forgotten, and it's a very important aspect. And we talked a bit together about the target group and the characteristics. And this is more a question about, what do they need to learn, right? What do they need to acquire? And the reskilling and upskilling, obviously, that's very important, otherwise we cannot live and we cannot function in our ever-changing jobs. So also in relation to the twin transitions, that's a very important issue, however, or in particular when you talk about twin transitions and digitalisation, content, new content pops up, which is required to acquire as well, like ethical issues. And I'm not so sure if that is already sufficiently part of training on digitalisation. We need the knowledge of technology, obviously, but we also need to learn where to find valid information, for instance. And as I said, the ethical issues are very important, and I think that they need more emphasis and more attention.

But there's also a danger in completely focusing on reskilling and upskilling, because it is so clearly connected, which it should be to the current job. But I think it's a short-term solution, if a solution at all, and that we also need long-term solutions. We need to constantly prepare people for changes in the future, for a changing world, adapting to it and even shaping it, because we are all together, part of the society, and that means that it has never been otherwise, but it's still very important, and I think that it gets too little attention in training that we need to focus also on aspects such as the acceptance of dealing with technology, the acceptance of changes in jobs, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and obviously lifelong learning skills, so that we are able to learn in the future for future skills and for future changes. And that is actually what I think that we need as individuals. So put the individual into place and into the centre, but that's also good and needed for organisations and the complete society. And obviously that has a lot of consequences for the task of adult educators. And in addition to that, the question you put before on Maria, on money: yes, I do think that it is much more than money. Money as such is not going to solve the problem, but obviously we do need a lot of money to educate the adult educators. And they are lifelong learners as well, so they have to develop further their professionalism. In the future, the knowledge for them will change also. So they have to be and have to act as lifelong learners, and they can be supported as well with very good training, and that costs money.

A: Thank you very much for underlying this aspect that we're all lifelong learners and so are our teachers and educators. You said something that was very - that really rang a bell to me, and it is the fact that, yeah, it's not only about about money, but because if we have a lot of money, a lot of investment, with no criteria, with no rationality, we will still not be able to reach our objectives.

Another thing that you said, you mentioned that we need to learn how to learn, and this is somehow one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning that the European Union puts forward in its recommendations on, well, key competences for lifelong learning. And since Maria, I am now addressing you, since 2017 we have in place the European pillar of social rights. And a couple of years later, its action plan indicated that 60% of adults should participate in training every year by 2030. Now, the landscape in Europe is very different: some member states are on a good track to achieve this objective, some others are definitely not. But my question to you is, do we have enough teachers for that? And more importantly, are they sufficiently trained and well equipped for the challenge? Are their working conditions good enough to create a stimulating learning environment for adult learners?

M: Okay, thank you. First of all, the question on whether we do have enough teachers, and my answer is, even if we did have enough teachers in 2023 then they wouldn't be enough or well trained enough for 2030. So yes, metrics show that there are teacher shortages across spectrums, and this is reported in the UNESCO and EU reports. So there is certainly a need to train them to catch up with the technology and develop the relevant skills. And I can refer to an example from UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in collaboration with the Open University in Shanghai, launching, just recently, launching a project aiming to enhance digital competences of adult education. And here is where the Lifelong Learning Platform has a role and is needed to promote a culture of lifelong learning for professional development, for digital competences and for inclusive education.

And I would refer to the comment I made before that it's really important to push forward proposals at local level, in individual countries, at EU level, to promote the enactment of lifelong learning as a kind of step towards filling the gap of adult educators, of adult trainers, and also develop key policies that will be able to support the training - the continuous training - of adult educators. When it comes to your second question of the creation of learning environments, then this reminds me of a slogan coming from a US convenor saying that "the teacher working conditions are student learning conditions" [inaudible]. So this really shows the continuous relationship between the working conditions and learning. And here is where sub decisions derived out of data being gathered from learning environments, from institutions that can support the development of learning initiatives and working conditions at the same time for each particular setting. So this is important. The working conditions are important because, as research shows, they influence the decisions of the adult education those to stay in the profession. And this would also have to do with issues around trust, respect and competences, relationships with stakeholders and with students.

And if I may also refer to something that could perhaps be avoided; we would rather not encourage - we would rather not welcome as adult educators or as networks that would want to enhance adult education, we would rather not welcome precarious employment, part-time employment and temporary working conditions that would be often related or linked to low wages and multiple job

holding. Previous research in similar fields have shown the dangers of introducing some such initiatives. So protective well being of adult education teachers would enhance their intention.

There is an excellent guide by the EU on how to attract, to advance the attractiveness of the teaching profession, focusing around three pillars of motivation, abilities and opportunities. And here, one can see a detailed grid on what is needed to be taken into consideration to enhance the in order to advance the attractiveness and enhance teachers well being. So just to finalise, I wanted to refer to the work we do as part of the [ELNE EU](#) project, which has links on enhancing the attractiveness of the teaching profession. And another project, also that is an EU Erasmus social dialogue, other projects which supports the transitions of experienced professionals from the industry in accessing and being successful in teaching and learning, in supporting teaching and learning in professions, in in higher education. Of course, this is more into higher education, but it shows that even if you enter an established environment, you do need support. So then with adult education, which is in its early steps, then much more support is needed. So just to finalise, I have a strong belief that lifelong learning needs not to be treated as an abstract concept, but as a well designed pedagogic approach, a project that can provide solutions to the training of the teachers, the trainers, the adult trainers, the adult teachers, and support them into creating better working environments for themselves and also for their students.

A: Thank you again for mentioning lifelong learning, not only as an abstract concept, but really as a pedagogical instrument. And I'd be very interested in reading more about those projects. Maybe we'll come back to it when we are offline. We're slowly going towards the end of this podcast, perhaps I would like to ask both of you for one final message. I know that we touched upon a lot of topics, and I know that a podcast is definitely not sufficient to explore them all, but I hope that we planted some seeds for our listeners to then develop some of the aspects that you indeed touched upon. Regina, one final sentence or message for our listeners.

R: Well, in general, I think that it is very important to realise that lifelong learning is not a choice that we are having. It is needed for everyone that goes for every person in the society, and also for adult educators themselves. And that is also what we then, in addition, have to provide the lifelong learning and support the lifelong learning of the adult educators caters themselves as well.

A: This is a great quote. I might actually use it in my advocacy work. Thank you very much. Maria?

M: Yes, I'm very positive that with this abundance of tools that is offered freely around us, one can really excel. The thing that we should focus on is pedagogy. We should never neglect pedagogy. It is key in this approach. So, basic principles of pedagogy, and of course, looking at methodology, excuse me, looking at technology as a methodology rather than the end in our approach and our attempt to enhance learning experiences.

A: Great, great, indeed. A very good message to end our podcast with. So let me thank you both of you again, for staying with us today. Thank you very much, Regina

R: Thank you for having me here. And thank you very much, Maria, thank you so much.

A: I hope that our listeners got a lot of food for thought, and they will, they will manage to deepen some of the of the concept that we dug out today. Thank you very much for listening, and I'll see you or hear you next time you.