

DEVELOPING PRACTICES FOR ADULT EDUCATORS' EVALUATION

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Abstract. *In recent years, there have been significant changes in the field of adult education. These changes have brought new opportunities for adult educators, expanding the types of programs offered to adult learners. The increasing role and spreading of adult education has given rise to the issue of adult educators' evaluation, because of overarching goal of evaluation is to improve the quality of the work of an institution.*

This paper focuses on EduEval (Evaluation for the Professional Development of Adult Education Staff), an EU funded project which is grounded in an action-research based on the active involvement of practitioners engaged in adult educators' evaluation. The project aims at investigating the issue of adult educators' evaluation in some European countries (which are: Latvia, Italy, Poland, Spain and Greece).

Thus paper illustrates the project objectives, and reports from the scientific approach which is used by Personality Socialization Research Institute (PSRI) of Rezeknes Augstskola (Latvia) to conduct an explorative survey on evaluation practices in the specific scope of adult social educators.

Keywords: *adult educators, evaluation, EduEval project.*

Adult education

Evaluation of adult educators is a crucial issue, since it is related to the quality of services offered and the results achieved by adult education institutions. Before illustrating the EduEval project and scientific approach by PSRI's to an explorative survey on the evaluation of social adult educators, it is useful to introduce the notion of adult education.

Many years ago, the great American pioneer adult-education, Eduard C. Lindeman, claimed that adult education is so named not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood defines its limits (Lindman, 1989). He also observed that, as a process, adult education revolves around non-vocational ideals.

In recent years, adult education is often considered a synonym of *lifelong learning* and *continuing education*. It is associated to non-formal education, vocational education, but also to higher education. The *Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning* (2011) contains a definition of adult learning which encompasses the entire range of learning activities:

*Adult learning is a vital component of the lifelong - learning continuum, covering the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities, general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training.*⁶

⁶<<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:372:0001:0006:EN:PDF>>; retrieved: 21.02.2014.

In the past, Lindeman expressed the same point of view, underlining the close, operative, relationship between the concept of *adult education* and the concept of *adult learning*. The first is understood as the general scope or the process whereby adults face learning activities in order to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values; while the second is intended as the theory (e.g. Andragogy)⁷ and practices through which adults learn more efficiently:

I am conceiving adult education in terms of a new technique for learning, a technique as essential to the college graduate as to the unlettered manual worker. It represents a process by which the adult learns to become aware of and to evaluate his experience. (Lindeman, 1989)

At any rate, the scope of adult education is really wide. So, from one hand, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)⁸ promotes adult learning and access to and participation in non-formal adult education for everybody, particularly for groups currently under-represented. But, from another hand, there are many other different types of adult education or continuing education:

- Earning a GED (General Educational Development), the equivalent of a high school diploma⁹
- Post-secondary degrees such as a bachelor or graduate degrees such as a master or doctorate
- Professional certification
- On-the-job training
- English as a second language
- Personal development.

Moreover, societies and cultures may have contrasting understanding on the concept of what it is an adult (Paterson, 1979).

Current literature seems to approach adult education dealing with creating enlivening environments for adult learners. This opinion is well expressed by the Sharan B. Merriam and Ralph G. Brockett's operative definition (1997):

[...] activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults. (Merriam & Brockett, 1997:7)

Adult Education in Latvia

In Latvia, adult education is officially defined as the “multi-dimensional educational process of persons (in age group 25-64) which ensures the development of the individual and his or her competitiveness in the labour

⁷ The term Andragogy was created by Alexander Kapp (a German educator) in 1833; it was used by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy in his theory of adult education, popularized in USA by the Malcolm Knowles.

⁸ EAEA is a European NGO with over 120 member organizations in more than 40 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.

⁹ GED tests are a group of five subject tests which, when passed, certify that the test taker as American or Canadian high school-level academic skills.

market”.¹⁰ In line with the lifelong learning conception, adult education had incorporated three main concepts:

- *Formal education* – a system which includes levels of basic education, secondary education and higher education, and which assure professional qualification certificates, issued by the government.
- *Non-formal education* - any organized educational activities outside formal education system, such as courses, conferences, lectures, seminars or workshops. The goal of non-formal education is to acquire new skills or improve knowledge and competences related to work, social and personal aims.
- *Informal learning* - is intentional, but less organized and also less structured, i.e., self-taught with the aim of improving the one own skills, consequently acquiring new knowledge.

In 2011, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB) conducted the second “Adult Education Survey” with the aim to obtain information on the progress of the lifelong learning strategy implementation.¹¹ The same survey was carried out in all EU Member States. Survey’s data shows that almost one third of adults (32.4%) aged 25 – 64 were participating in formal and/or non-formal education. Females participated more actively (37.4%), as compared to males (26.9%). Persons aged 25 – 34 were learning the most actively (38.0%). Persons having higher education and employed persons participated in education more frequently, 54.3% and 40.3%, respectively, demonstrating how important it is, especially for working people, the acquisition of new skills in a rapidly changing society. This was confirmed by the characteristic of adult learners: 4.3% of the population aged 25 – 64 participated in formal education activities, but employed persons (83.5%) participated in learning activities more frequently, followed by individuals aged 25 – 34 (55.4%) and persons with higher education (56.6%).

Survey also reveals that non-formal education plays a significant role in the lifelong learning conception (30% of the population aged 25 – 64 participated in non-formal education activities). Respondents answered to the question “What were the main reasons you participated in education activity?” in this way: 95.3%, to acquire knowledge useful in everyday life, 86.1%, to rise possibilities for further career, and 68.0%, to obtain a certificate/diploma. It is important to note that adult participation in non-formal education activities was mainly work-related, and this was the key reason for 77.3% of respondents.

¹⁰ http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Latvia/Latvia_Education_Law.pdf

¹¹ Survey was conducted in all EU Member States in compliance with the methodology developed by the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat). Within the framework of the survey, population aged 25 – 64 was surveyed within the whole territory of Latvia - totally 5048 persons (<<http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistikas-temas/metodologija/adult-education-37243.html>>; <http://www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/nr_23_apsekojuma_pieauguso_izglitiba_rezultati_13_00_lv_en_0.pdf>; retrieved 16.03.2014).

However, from this survey, some issues related to the current economic situation in Latvia, emerge: persons would like to participate in education activities, but cannot do it due principally to the cost. 53.3% of respondents complained that couldn't afford training cost. Other barriers are relate to work schedule (35.0%), and to the lack of time deriving from family responsibilities (30.8%).

EduEval project

EduEval (Evaluation for the Professional Development of Adult Education Staff) is a multilateral Grundtvig project funded by EU and inspired by the modern fundamental lifelong learning principles (Sharma, 2002). It started on January 2014, and its expiration date is December 2015. The project's idea comes from the observation that the current global economic crisis has affected the public and private entities which are working in social and educational services. This is a serious problem, since these services, which look after people of all age groups and social classes (including immigrants and disadvantaged persons), are often, because of crisis, provided by private entities employing social educators who don't possess an adequate level of professional competences. One of EduEval ideas is to contribute to the supervising and the monitoring the staff working in private and public social entities.

However, EduEval focuses on adult educators' evaluation, tackling this issue through a comparative analysis of models, programs and practices in monitoring, testing, counseling, supervising social workers and educators in the European countries which are participating to the project (Italy, Latvia, Poland, Greece, and Spain). The main goal of the project is defining the professional role of the adult education staff evaluator, which is a function usually carried out by other professional figures, such as supervisors or coordinators.

The cornerstone of the project is a collaborative approach between holders of practical knowledge (social and adult educational workers) and holders of theoretical knowledge (academic researchers).

The project not only surveys models and practices adopted in evaluating adult education staff, but also allows the sharing their experiences via workshops and online work groups among project's partners.

The main characteristics of the project are:

- to promote fruitful debate and exchanges between professionals involved in the evaluation of adult education staff and researchers;
- to contribute in comparing models, methodologies and practices used by professionals involved in the evaluation of adult education staff;
- to develop guidelines for evaluators of the adult education staff, in order to offer a common theoretical background about evaluation systems and processes in the specific field of adult education;
- to explore systems and practices in adult education staff evaluation, aimed at cooperating to the definition of a European profile of the evaluator

profession;

- to improve adult education systems, thanks to the development and transfer of innovation and good practices, through the exchange and dissemination of experiences and concrete results.

The above objectives should be achieved through:

- an explorative research in the participating countries about adult education and evaluation programs and practices;
- a mobility workshop aimed to share theories and practices about the evaluation of the adult education staff between practitioners and researchers, in order to build a collaborative knowledge;
- a handbook that will summarize theoretical background and practical implications in providing evaluation methods for adult education staff;
- the implementation of a wiki (online collaboration environment) for the purposes of giving information and facilitating its access;
- the development of guidance and counseling tools and methods for the evaluation of adult education staff;
- the implementation of a curriculum for the initial training of the professionals involved in the evaluation of adult education staff, in order to promote the wellbeing, the quality and productivity of those who work in the adult education field; in this way preventing their risk of burn-out and occupational diseases.

PSRI's research approach

EduEval project provides a preparatory desk research by each participating countries on the following topics:

- What is Adult Education;
- Adult education services (norms, regulations, and articulations);
- The evaluator's profile (related to the evaluation of adult education staff).

Moreover, the project also provides the realization of a handbook which “consists in a survey and in a comparison of the evaluation models that are present in the consortium partners countries”.¹² As it is well-known, a survey is a descriptive research used to gather information about population groups or specific target groups to “learn about their characteristic, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences” (Leedy & Ormorod, 2005:183). Survey research is prevalent among many professional fields and there are many survey research methods which can be effectively adopted for data gathering, such as written questionnaire, cover letter, mail survey, electronic survey, telephone survey, personal interviews (Brewer, 2009).

Face-to-face interviews, based on the Rogerian interview techniques, will be the method for data gathering which EduEval will employ in order to bring out

¹² EduEval (Evaluation for the Professional Development of Adult Education Staff) Lifelong Learning Programme Application Form, Detailed description of the project (2013).

attitudes, strategies, processes and practices adopted by adult educators' evaluators.¹³ All project's partners have been required to interview two types of subjects: 10 representative/directors of adult education services and 20 evaluators involved in the evaluation of adult education staff.

Many scholars agree that a survey research based on the technique of personal interviews gives the best quality of data (Polit & Beck, 2013), but they also underline its evident disadvantages, since it is the most costly and time consuming technique in data collection, and doesn't allow anonymity (Berends, 2006; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Gay et al., 2009). Furthermore, it ought to be noted that the Rogerian interview technique is more appropriate in therapeutic counseling, in general, in any situation when one doesn't want to ask direct questions (Rogers, 1945, Okun & Kantrowitz, 2008). However, the specific characteristics of adult education in Latvia, and the peculiarity of the geographic area where the interviews should be carried out, suggested us to adapt the common research method to our specific context.¹⁴ This was prompted to overcome three main difficulties:

- The hugeness of adult education topic;
- The impossibility to find in a small geographic area an adequate number of institutions from which deriving the required sample of interviewees;
- The limited number of days provided for the research activity.

In order to adapt the survey to our local needs, and selecting topics that are of any interest to available respondents (Gay et al., 2009), we introduced some changes. We reduced the survey's scope, focusing it on the specific target group of adult social-educators' evaluators. This target group is well represented in our research geographical area and the evaluation of social-educators (or social pedagogues) is a challenging and topical issue. Moreover, we adopt a two steps mixed method, based on the integration between elite semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. Respondents have been selected taking into account the EduEval aims and their representativeness in the specific context of social pedagogues' activities.

More in detail, our survey has been designed following a mixed research approach (Smith & Kleine, 1986; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), which integrates qualitative and quantitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, 2011; Denzin, 2010; Grbich, 2013). In recent years, the integrated use of qualitative and quantitative methods in studying the same phenomenon has received significant attention among scholars and researchers. There is a growing consensus on *triangulation*

¹³ Rogerian interview techniques are mostly used in therapeutic counseling, and are based on the theory of Carl Ransom Rogers, the American psychologist who was among the founders of the humanistic approach (or client-centered approach) to psychology.

¹⁴ Rezeknes is a city in the Latgalia region of eastern Latvia, situated 242 kilometers east of Riga, and 63 kilometers west of the Latvian-Russian border. It is the 7th largest city in Latvia (about 37,000 inhabitants). In the town, there are classes of interest and non-formal education for children and youth, but lack adult education institutions, except the Rezeknes Augstskola.

as “a validity procedure where researchers look for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this perspective, we will principally use the interviews to define a list of thematic topics and develop from them the contents for the questionnaire.

The idea of deriving thematic topics from the interviews is shared by many researchers in various social investigations (Lawrence & Thomas, 1999; Ohl, 2013; Flick, 2014). In some cases, elite interviews are a good method for a preliminary investigation phase. Denis Royer proposes an approach based on three steps. The first is a qualitative expert interview study, to better understand the nature of Enterprise Identity Management Systems; the second step is dedicated to the design of theoretical explanations; and the third is the step in which previous results are reviewed and confirmed (Royer, 2013). The validity of a preliminary investigation based on elite interviews has also been confirmed in a recent socio-anthropological research, where the interviews have led to the identification of some relevant aspects otherwise difficult to detect (Marzano & Vicedomine, 2013).

In our case, the use of a mixed methods approach aims at establishing a comparison between qualitative data representing the perspectives of a specific target group of social pedagogues, geographically located, and the more general context of adult education.

Interviews will be also used to obtain quantitative data that might result useful to integrate the questionnaire data. To this purpose, interviews will be transcribed and undergone a preliminary data analysis, noting ideas, listing topics, grouping them, and remarking exceptions (Bellavita, 1997; Dey, 2003). The transcriptions will be analyzed by extracting, categorizing and comparing their contents. Interviews will be integrated adding information gathered from other data sources (official statistical reports, local literature, local associations’ web sites, and social network blogs) – with the aims of better understanding the social context.

In the questionnaire construction we posed particular attention to the Michael Quinn Patton works on evaluation, in which he emphasizes the pragmatic value inherent in a *diagnostic focus*. His diagnostic evaluation is more often qualitative or a mixture of qualitative and quantitative. Coining the expression *utilization-focused evaluation*, the author, analyzing evaluation programs, suggested that:

Unless one knows that a program is operating according to design, there may be little reason to expect it to produce the desired outcomes. (Patton, 1985)

For this reason, interviews and questionnaire have been designed also at exploring the following main dimensions:

- Sensitivity
 - about evaluation strategies
 - about evaluation processes.

- Awareness
 - about the utility of evaluation.
 - about effectiveness of evaluation.
- Information
 - Sources
 - Level of information received (about the general evaluation programs and about the specific internal process).
- Motivation/expectation
 - Availability to participate in evaluation processes.
 - Difficulties to participate in evaluation processes.

Finally, PSRI in carrying out its survey, will also keep in mind the experiences of another EU funded project, VINEPAC (www.vinepac.eu),¹⁵ which produced an instrument, Validipack, for evaluating adult educators' competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings.

Conclusion

EduEval is an ambitious project at its initial stage. It bases its motivation in the growing concern about quality of educational and social services. The project represents an opportunity to compare the different approaches to adult education evaluation pursued by five European countries. Indeed, evaluation of trainers' /adult educators' competences, no matter whether they have been acquired in formal, non-formal or informal learning contexts, is a crucial issue at European level. And in this perspective, it will be useful a comparison between the EduEval project results and those achieved through VINEPAC (Rutka et al., 2012; Shah, 2012).

At last, we hope the variation that PSRI introduced in the research survey will contribute to testing effectiveness of qualitative and the quantitative mixed approaches.

Summary

In recent years, the increasing role and spreading of adult education has given rise to the issue of the adult educators' evaluation, since the overarching goal of evaluation is to increase the quality of work of an institution.

This paper reports from EduEval, an EU funded project which is grounded in an action-research based on the active involvement of practitioners engaged in adult educators' evaluation. In fact, social and educational services are influenced by the quality of the staff involved. The project started on January 2014 and it aims at investigating the issue of adult educators' evaluation in some European countries (Latvia, Italy, Poland, Spain and Greece).

The paper illustrates the project objectives and the scientific approach which will be used by Personality Socialization Research Institute (PSRI) of Rezeknes

¹⁵ See Validipack documentation at <<http://www.capival.eu/home>>; retrieved: 02.22.2014.

Augstskola (Latvia) to conduct an explorative survey on evaluation practices in the specific scope of adult social educators. In fact, the specific characteristics of adult education in Latvia, and the peculiarity of the geographic area where the interviews should be carried out, suggested some variations. In order to adapt the survey to the real local exigencies, also selecting topics that are of interest of available respondents (Gay et al., 2009), the survey's scope has been focused on the specific target group of adult social-educators' evaluators. Moreover, a two steps mixed method will be used, which is based on the integration between elite semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. This approach is motivated by the aims at establishing a comparison between qualitative data representing the perspectives of a specific target group of social pedagogues, geographically located, and the more general context of adult education.

The paper also presents short notes about adult education in Latvia and the role of the Latvian State Service of Education Quality.

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