

The Transformative Impact of the Hellenic Open University in Education

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Abstract: The purpose of the research is the exploration of the transformative influence of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) on the educational practice of Secondary Education teachers who have completed or are currently completing their studying at HOU Postgraduate Program of Adult Education. A qualitative methodology was chosen and the semi-constructed interview is the selected tool for the data collection. Ten cases of Secondary Education teachers having completed or promptly completing the HOU Postgraduate Program of Adult Education comprise the sample; the convenience sampling strategy was used to choose them. The data obtained were analyzed and processed by the content analysis method. The interpretation of the data was based on the theory of transformative learning. The research questions are related to the investigation of the perceptions regarding the activation of critical reflection and the implementation of transformative learning by the sampled teachers. It was revealed that attending the HOU Adult Education program, students achieve activation of critical reflection, since assumptions relating to the practice of teachers undergo critical scrutiny and, consequently, a change in the applied educational practice is ensued.

Keywords: theories of adult learning, active learning techniques, self-directed learning, critical reflection, transformative learning, Hellenic Open University (HOU).

INTRODUCTION

In a society that is changing rapidly, lifelong learning emerges as an imperative and teachers have realized the difficult yet crucial role they play in shaping the relationship between the child and knowledge in the course of the child's life. Teachers are trying to improve their teaching practices in order to actively involve students in the learning process as it is now common ground that "the more active is the students, the more effective the learning process" [1]. Through the activation of critical reflection, teachers are forced to submit their assumptions to critical assessment [2], a process that is a prerequisite for achieving transformative learning. Furthermore, even if transformative learning does not occur, surely there is a change in the way the adults approach a problematic situation [3].

In this research we examine the benefits to the learning process through the attendance of HOU Postgraduate Program of

Adult Education. These research questions are:

- 1) Do secondary school teachers use in their daily educational practice the active learning techniques that have been taught during their studies in HOU graduate program "Adult Education"?

- 2) Do they reflect critically on the educational practice they apply and does transformative learning occur?

THEORETICAL PART

Theories of adult learning and self-directed learning

Learning is the conscious effort of the individual to acquire knowledge in order to be separated from the learning that happens anyway in one's life since learning comes from experience and experience has every individual throughout his life. Continuous experience, therefore, entails continuous learning [1].

Within the lifelong learning, there are many discussions about how adults learn and new theories emerge. Until a few years ago, learning as an adult was a luxury for those who had a special love for knowledge. Today and given the rapid technological development, as well as labor mobility, learning throughout the life of the individual becomes a necessity.

Learning theories can be summarized in the behavioral, cognitive and humanitarian. In behavioral theories, the role of the teacher is active and the role of the learner is rather passive. Regarding the knowledge, behavioral theories claim that it is the same with truth, therefore, it is the same for all learners [1]. Cognitive theories face knowledge as something that is outside

educators and students and require prioritization in the learning process, which is also a characteristic of the behavioral theories. Therefore, all students cannot reach the same levels of learning [1].

Bloom distinguished learning in the cognitive and emotional field and argued that the steps of learning are parallel. A similar hierarchy of learning was done by Cagne [1]. The active role of the learner is emphasized in the humanistic learning theories believing that the motivation for learning is inherent in the individual. Humanistic theories are based on personal experience, the use of which implies learning and the role of the teacher is to extend the range of these experiences [1].

The best training experiences are those that rely on partnership and directed interaction between the educator and the student [4]. That theory is based on six assumptions which briefly are:

- adults want to know why they need to learn,
- to decide on their own for their life,
- to acquire knowledge relevant to the situations they face,
- to bring many experiences which must be exploited in the learning process,
- learning is problem-oriented
- the most important motivation to learn is internal [5].

The person-centered theory of Carl Rogers is in the same context of self-realization. According to it, the central role is played by active learning based on self-motivated participants and the role of the adult educator is limited to a facilitator [5].

Perhaps the more synthetic approach to adult education was proposed by Jarvis consisting of “a multi-dimensional analysis of the phenomenon of experiential education of adults in the sociocultural context” [5]. According to Jarvis, adult educators must have both expertise and social skills in order to understand in depth the learners and to enhance their self-activation [5].

Furthermore, it should be noted that adult learning, according to Habermas, has three functions associated with each other:

The instrumental learning: the learning of scientific knowledge and knowing how to handle your environment [1].

The interactive learning: the understanding of others in the context of communication. The self-reflective learning: the effort of the individual to understand himself [6]. It is, therefore, the self-reflective learning which is associated with self-directed

learning and consequently with the critical reflection and transformative learning.

That researcher who focused on self-directed learning is Brookfield [7]. The self-directed learning is considered as one of the six basic principles which are prerequisites for effective learning in adult education. The other five are: voluntary participation, mutual respect, partnership, action and critical reflection [7]. The self-directed learning is a process in which the learners have the leading role because they set the terms and conditions for this to take place. In practice this means that the student is in direct contact with the sources of learning [8]. According to Brookfield “the self-directed learning is a process where the individual sets learning objectives, consults experts (mentors), uses the literature, processes the evaluation criteria of learning” [7].

However, a question arises regarding the self-directed learning which is whether this can be achieved, particularly in modern society. Brookfield gives the answer himself saying that “the absolute self-directed learning is impossible” [32]. For Mezirow more important in self-directed learning is how it can contribute to the finding of malfunctions of adulthood in the context of critical self-reflection. Referring now to adult education, Mezirow claims that it can be achieved in four ways, a component of which is the critical reflection. These ways are:

- processing of existing reference frameworks
- learning new reference frameworks
- transformation of opinions
- transformation of the mental habits [7].

Therefore, an educational program aimed at adults should take into account [1]:

- promoting personal development
- making full use of the person's abilities
- encouraging the development of perspective
- growing confidence, the power of choice, action and responsibility.

Adult educators should help learners to distinguish the views that have been uncritically adopted and the development should be a goal of adult education [9].

Transformative Learning: Mezirow

The theory of transformative learning is very important in adult education. The value of the theory is recognized more and more by researchers of adult education, as the last twenty years has been the most debated and there are many publications related to it [8]. Dirks [10], Cranton & Kasl [11], Taylor & Cranton [12], Kitchenham [13] have conducted research regarding the transformative learning, and there are also

researchers who express their doubts about the transformative power of learning [14, 15]. Undoubtedly, however, the main exponent of the theory of transformative learning is Jack Mezirow, who theorized it and his work “in recent years is one of the main reference of scholars regarding the adult education” [5].

According to Mezirow, the way each person interprets reality depends on the perceptual system, a system imposed by the cultural context and adopted through the process of socialization. Therefore, a new experience is acceptable if it is consistent with our perceptual system and accordingly rejected if it differs [5]. Moreover, in the theory of Mezirow critical thinking is the one that leads to transformative learning and without it “the transformative learning cannot take place” [7].

In order to activate the critical thinking, the individual must be confronted with a disorienting dilemma. And then the process can be summarized approximately as follows: the person is forced to make a critical evaluation of assumptions, trying new roles and after the individual feels capable of playing these new roles, he reinstated in life taking into account the new circumstances [2]. Therefore, adults must incorporate the effects of different worldviews in their own, in order to extend it and become transformative learning. During this process of transformation, experience, critical thinking, self-reflection and rational dialogue are essential [13].

Specifically, each experience is related to the reference framework, according to which it is interpreted; how each of us perceives himself is inextricably tied to our reference framework. The reference framework is “a complex webs of assumptions, expectations, values and beliefs that act as filters with which we perceive ourselves and the world” [9]. The critical thinking is inherent in the objective reframing on assumptions of others and self-reflected critical thinking critic is inherent in subjective reframing where our personal references are checked [2]. Finally, the critical thinking is closely related to rational dialogue on the theory of transformative learning. According to Mezirow, critical thinking and rational dialogue are complementary elements and interacting factors in achieving the necessary consensus to determine the meaning of the experience and the transformation [16]. Adulthood is also a key element, as is the common internal element linking the two concepts, especially with the possibility that it gives for independent action on the basis of interpretations that the experience gives to the adult [16]. Therefore, it is thought that the critical thinking and the rational dialogue are interdependent and how they will work depends on the social context in which they occur [16].

The more democratic the social context, the more smoothly are the process of critical thinking and rational dialogue and consequently the social context affects the interpretation of the experiences through modulated reference frameworks.

Transformative learning can exist only in the adult life of the individual, since then, according to Mezirow, reflection can “have an integrated dimension” [5]. This is because the person in the adult phase of his life needs to understand the importance of the experiences that give meaning to life [17]. As a person grows and matures, and thus having more experience, he challenges the assumptions adopted and accordingly dismiss or continue to accept them [17].

Instead, regarding critical thinking, minors have a “non-conscious way and usually are not aware of how circumstances have defined their relationships, their views and practices” [16]. But it should not be considered that in adults every activation of critical reflection causes transformative learning. The person can decide not to change the assumptions on which it is critically contemplated. According to Brookfield [7] “critical thinking can take place without the consequent transformation of the mental outlook or habits”. But the way the adult approaches a problematic situation changes, and through the activation of critical thinking the efforts to resolve the problems become more efficient and ultimately change how the individual sees the world [3]. This is what the transformative learning tries to achieve, “the emancipation of ourselves from these assumptions which we take for granted [9], in order to achieve the ultimate goal of adult education which, according to Mezirow, is self-realization [7].

Transformative Learning: Brookfield

Brookfield, along with Mezirow, are the major representatives of the theory of transformative learning. Specifically, Kokkos [8] states that “Brookfield is, after Mezirow, the best known worldwide theorist of Transformative Learning” and he was the one who made more understandable “the often treacherous reasoning of Mezirow and developed methods and techniques so the adult educator can contribute to the transformative learning process”. Brookfield considers critical reflection as a necessary element of transformative learning, but admits that it may not lead to the transformation of the mental outlook or habits. Therefore, the presence of critical reflection is a necessary, but not sufficient condition towards the achievement of transformative learning. Moreover, it is he who gave a political dimension to the critical reflection [7, 18]. Without the ability to think critically, “we are unable to separate our existence from the repressive mechanisms of money and power that have invaded our life” [18].

Accordingly it does not mean that in every case the reflection is critical if it does not identify the power relations that exist behind a particular learning context [7, 18]. He concludes that “critical thinking upon even the most personal issues or the most unknown areas is culturally dependent» [7]. For Brookfield critical thinking is more of a social and collaborative work process, because the presence of others is essential to highlight the problematic assumptions and provide the necessary emotional support [7, 18]. Finally, as good strategies that promote transformative learning the Brookfield [9] suggests good strategies that promote transformative learning such as: autobiographies, critical incidents and collaborative problem solving.

Adult education in Greece: The case of the Hellenic Open University (HOU)

After the mid-90s the HOU was founded, the creation of which is a result of hard competition prevailing in education worldwide. Obtaining qualifications in the globalized world we live in becomes a necessity associated with the effort of adults to seek better job or improve their current job. Additionally, the attendance in the HOU can be associated with the love of learning and the need for personal fulfillment. Moreover, learning by distance in HOU can act as a lure for people who have higher family or professional obligations or live in remote areas.

In order for Greece to align with the policies of other European countries and the eradication of social injustice in education the HOU was founded in 1997. The HOU is based on the idea of open, flexible, democratic, transcendent, different university, “which focuses on scientific research and the right of all citizens to access to higher education” [31]. As a result, the foundation of the HOU contributed to the rapid development of distance education in Greece, giving a second chance for university studies in the adult population.

RESEARCH PART

Methodology

The research questions are:

- 1) Do secondary school teachers use in their daily educational practice the active learning techniques that have been taught during their studies in HOU graduate program “Adult Education”?
- 2) Do they reflect critically on the educational practice they apply and does transformative learning occur?

The qualitative approach was chosen as suitable for conducting the research, given that this is a complex issue and this methodology is consistent with

the purpose of the research. Furthermore, the purpose and research questions are general, they have range and seek understanding of the participants' experience; thereby qualitative research is the appropriate method [19]. Moreover, this methodological approach is not interested in “the generalization of the results to a population, but how to conduct the investigation of a main phenomenon in depth” [19]. In conclusion, the application of the above methodological approach is not at all a coincidence, but the choice is determined by a number of factors, including the objective, the research questions, the implementation possibilities and the time limits [20].

Given the quality-oriented research, the interview was selected as the data collection tool. The interview is a sensitive, yet powerful method [21], consisting of open-ended questions so that participants can best express their views without being limited by the views of the researchers or by previous findings [19]. The major advantage of interviews is that they provide useful information when direct observation is not possible [19] and, through them, “social scientists are researching varieties of human experience” [21].

Regarding the open-ended questions, the flexibility they offer and the possibility of “a truer assessment of what the participant thinks” [22] was the reasons to select them, besides the difficulty in analyzing them.

Sampling

We contacted ten secondary school teachers who have completed or are near the completion of their dissertation on “Adult Education” at HOU. The convenient sampling was used as appropriate for our research, so we chose individuals who were willing and available to participate in our research [19], although “in this case, the researcher cannot say for sure that individuals are representative of the population” [19] and, therefore, no form of generalization of the results can be allowed in the general population since it is a non probability sample [23]. However, in qualitative approaches the researchers are not interested in “the generalization of the results to a population, but in how to develop the investigation of a central phenomenon in depth” [19]. Therefore, the most important part in this research is the richness and depth of the data, as well as the specificity and uniqueness [24].

FINDINGS - DISCUSSION

Q1: Do secondary school teachers use in their daily educational practice the active learning techniques that have been taught during their studies in HOU graduate program “Adult Education”?

Firstly, we investigated whether the respondents thought they learned sufficiently the active

learning techniques through their studies in the HOU and if they are convinced of their effectiveness. These conditions are associated with whether they ultimately apply them in their daily teaching practice. S1, S2, S4, S6 admit that they have learned about the techniques in a satisfactory way. S7 and S10 already knew them like S3, who has now found that they can be applied in Adult Education. Those who differ are S5 and S9, who believe that they have not experienced adequately the active learning techniques in HOU.

All respondents apply or attempt to apply active learning techniques in their teaching at some extent. Two respondents (S2, S8) said that their implementation depends on the object teaching.

The participants' views are similar with the findings of Mpakirtzis [25] who states that "we learn what we are experiencing" and with Rogers's [1] and Courau's [26], who argue that the more active the trainees are, the more satisfactory the learning outcome will be.

Regarding the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of active learning techniques, one of the respondents put the spotlight on "receptivity" of learners to make changes as teachers. This puts them out of their comfort zone which is the traditional educational procedure. This shows one of the barriers in the learning process of adult learners and "often occurs in those who are prisoners of habit" [1].

The interesting finding that emerged is that teachers in our sample are well positive in the application of active learning techniques in the educational process. When it is not possible to implement them, the obstacles have to do with the limited teaching time and the nature of the subject they teach. In one case, it was found that there is confusion between the active and direct teaching methods. In any case, the use of active teaching methods is not a panacea and it does not cover other gaps in education, as it was indicated by one interviewee.

Q2: Do secondary school teachers reflect critically on the educational practice they apply and does transformative learning occur?

All participants describe the educational process as a two-way relationship between the trainer and the trainee. All the respondents admit that it is their ambition to incorporate genuine dialogue in their teaching, but they do not always succeed. The reasons for not succeeding are: the students are not ready, the dialogue is not genuine, there are many aspects, the curriculum is tight and the time is limited.

The vast majority of respondents say they experienced the theory of transformative learning in the context of their studies in the HOU in a satisfactory level. The exception is S8 who completed the specific master in 2010 and claims that not much importance was given to the theory of transformative learning. The results are similar regarding if they submitted the assumptions related to the exercise of their teaching work under critical thinking. Additionally, most of the respondents believe that they critically thought during their studies in the HOU. All respondents believe they use critical thinking in their daily teaching practice.

All respondents agree that the roles of teacher and student are rotated in the learning process, i.e. the student becomes a teacher and the teacher becomes a student. Thus, the view of Freire [27] that "the teacher is also a student and the student is also a teacher" seems to express an unequivocal and unchanged educational reality over the years. Moreover, according to Manthou [28] in order to "acquire knowledge genuine dialogue between teachers and students is required". Genuine dialogue is a target of many participants but they do not always achieve it. One reason is that "children are not ready" as adulthood is the common internal element linking the concept of critical reflection on the meaning of rational dialogue [16]. For Mezirow critical reflection and rational dialogue are interacting factors for transformation [16]. Critical reflection in adulthood is the point where Mezirow fully agrees with Brookfield [8, 28].

Regarding the transformative learning almost all respondents claim that their connection with this theory within their studies in the program "Adult Education" at HOU was satisfactory. Satisfactory learning of the method is not surprising since this is a key object of one of the four compulsory modules in order to complete this particular master.

The intention of the teachers to improve their teaching methods by introducing contemplative practices in their classroom and transforming learning is also presented in the research of Toy & Ok [30].

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research is to investigate the transformative action of the HOU in the educational practice of secondary school teachers who attended graduate program of "Adult Education". With the qualitative methodology and interviews we investigated whether transformative learning for teachers of secondary education is achieved through the ideas that they expressed.

Regarding the contact with active learning techniques through the attendance in HOU, half of the sample speaks of good knowledge of it. It is found that

respondents apply active learning techniques that they are trying to achieve genuine dialogue during the educational process

The expectations of the respondents from the Mastes "Adult Education" at HOU do not differ from those of adult learners from the corresponding education programs. However, in this program there are additional targets such as critical evaluations of the assumptions, the transformation of learners and self-directed learning

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