

METHODS THAT WORK: BEST PRACTICES OF ADULT EDUCATORS IN THE USA

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The article discusses best practices of American adult educators. The basic terms related to the topic, which are used in academic literature, are defined. Considering the range of terms synonymous to "adult educator" (teacher, instructor, trainer, practitioner, facilitator, mentor, educator, resource person, programme advisor, etc.), the roles adult educators play are described. The article concentrates on identifying the most important barriers to learning of adults (situational, dispositional, institutional, environmental, emotional) understanding of which is necessary for adult educators. Previous experience of adults is described as one of possible reasons for resistance to learning. The paper also reveals methods which adult educators use to overcome the barriers and facilitate adult learners in reaching their educational goals, the importance of flexibility for adult educators, providing choices for adults and ways of getting feedback. The eclectic approach to teaching adults, which may combine learner-centred teaching, content-centred teaching, reflective teaching, cooperative learning, experiential learning, and even traditional teaching, is found to be most appropriate. Thus, the article suggests considering the needs of adults, not adherence to a certain theory or approach, to be of utmost importance for adult educators. Best practices of American adult educators include: theory followed by practice, equal participation, team work, availability of choices, different types of assessment and reflection, which ensure practice, variety and enforcement.

Keywords: adult; adult educators; method; best practices; traditional teaching; reflective approach; barriers to learning.

Introduction

Drastic changes connected with technological advances revealed discrepancy between the necessity of lifelong learning and the lack of highly-qualified adult educators. The USA is a country with a great number of immigrants who had and still have to learn how to live and work in a new environment. American institutions and organisations have accumulated rich experience of teaching adults and training adult educators. Such experience is invaluable in contemporary competitive society, therefore, methods that work should be exploited in other countries.

The issues related to adult learning theory and practice were developed by many prominent scholars: Brookfield (2015), Lindeman (1926), Merriam (2007), Mezirow (2009), Knowles (1989), Rogers (2010), Zmyeyov (2013) and others. However, the problem of the most effective methods used by adult educators in the USA needs further analysis. This fact explains the choice of the subject for our investigation.

The aim of the article is to explore best practices of American adult educators and highlight the most effective methods. The main objectives are as follows: to define the basic terms related to the topic, which are used in academic literature, identify the main adult learning barriers, reveal effective methods applied by adult educators in the USA.

Defining the basic terms

It is necessary to define the terms used in the paper: adult, adult educator, best practices, method, traditional teaching and some others.

There are many approaches to define the term "adult" which vary across different cultures, that is why there is no generally accepted definition of this term. Houle (1996) believes that "an adult" is a person who is physically mature and has the right to become a responsible member of a society (p. 282). Knowles (1990) argues that first of all an adult is a psychologically mature person who plays certain social roles taking full responsibility for their own lives (p. 57). Therefore, "an adult" may be perceived as a psychologically and physically mature person who becomes a responsible member of a society.

A wide range of terms synonymous to "adult educator" is used in scientific literature: educator, teacher, instructor, adult education teacher, practitioner, resource person, programme advisor, facilitator, trainer,

mentor and others (Chugai, 2016, p. 51). The complexity of teaching adults leads to the whole range of roles adult educators play: needs analyst who determines adults' needs; curriculum developer who designs course plans and syllabuses; materials developer who creates classroom materials; counselor who identifies problems and learning difficulties, offers individual counseling; mentor who assists other adult educators that are not experienced enough; researcher who conducts research in their subject area and teaching (Richards, 1996, p. 99-100). Educators who teach business English prefer the term "trainers" to "teachers" which reflects the fact that they tend to help their learners to become better at English thus doing more facilitating than teaching (Hughes, 2016, p. 9). Such terms as "coach", "language consultant" and "service provider" reflect the styles and approaches that emerge in the business context (Hughes, 2016, p. 12). Merriam (2007) uses the term "adult educator" to name the person who performs educational functions working with adults (p. 375). In order to avoid confusion the term "adult educator" is used in this paper.

"Best practice" is defined in Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2017) as "a procedure that has been shown by research and experience to produce optimal results and that is established or proposed as a standard suitable for widespread adoption". Usually, this term is used in the plural form: "best practices".

The meaning of the term "method" is explained by Edward Anthony (1963) who compares it with "approach" and "technique" presenting the relations between them as hierarchical: "techniques carry out a method which is consistent with an approach" (p. 63). "Approach" is a set of assumptions dealing with the nature of the subject, learning, and teaching, "method" is defined as systematic application of theory in accordance with a certain approach, and "technique" is understood as a specific activity which represents a chosen method (Anthony, 1963, p. 63-67). Therefore, all three terms are closely interconnected. According to Brown (1994), "method" is a generalised set of classroom specifications for accomplishing objectives which determines teacher and student's roles, behaviour, relationships, sequencing of activities and materials used (p. 51). Moreover, method should be applicable to a variety of learners and contexts. "Technique" is a wide variety of exercises, activities, or devices used in the language classroom for realising lesson objectives (Brown, 1994, p. 51).

Brown (1994) highlights different types of teaching which are widely used in pedagogical literature as opposed to traditional teaching: learner-centred teaching, cooperative learning and content-centred teaching (Brown, 1994, p. 82). According to Taron and Yule (1989), the main characteristics of traditional teaching are as follows: teacher uses textbooks and is considered to be the main source of information; failures are explained by laziness or low intelligence of learners and the learning process is rarely viewed from the learner's standpoint (p. 133). As opposed to traditional, other types of teaching have their own characteristics: learner-centred teaching is focused on learners' needs and styles, provides learners with some control over studying; cooperative learning emphasises on collaboration of students and teachers, pair and group work, different ways of evaluation; content-centred teaching focuses on the information which is important for learners and increases their intrinsic motivation (Brown, 1994, p. 80-82).

Taron and Yule (1989) conclude that practically all approaches to effective teaching recognise the importance of the learner's needs. Thus, a number of factors having an impact on the learning process are in the focus of researchers' attention (p. 133). That is why it is important to be aware of adult learning barriers before choosing or designing methods that work.

Mertesdorf (1990) defines "barriers to learning" of adults as perceived factors that are disruptive on the way to pursuing their educational needs and goals (p.4). The researcher uses terms "barriers to learning" and "learning barriers" interchangeably and provides the description of each type of learning barriers: dispositional, institutional and situational. Dispositional barriers are connected with psychological characteristics of adult learners, which prevent them from adapting to a new educational environment. Institutional barriers are caused by the policy of education providers, which discourages adult learners. Situational barriers are related to job, family, economic issues, etc. in adult learners' lives (Mertesdorf, 1990, p. 4-5).

Adult learning barriers and methods of overcoming them

Post (2010) considers time restriction as one of the main barriers to learning which may be explained by many other responsibilities of adults, therefore learning experience should be a worthwhile investment for adults (p. 6). The necessity to fulfil many everyday tasks causes lots of pressure, which explains limited attention span of adults. First of all, adults see themselves as professionals, parents, spouses, etc., not as learners. In addition, because adults think critically and do not trust other people easily, they tend to question what adult educators do or say. Oftentimes adults have their own reasons to learn which they do not speak about openly (Post, 2010, p. 6-7).

Lieb (1991) also names barriers which hinder active participation of adults in learning: they may be not confident, not aware of opportunities to learn, face too many excessive rules and regulations, have many

problems to solve like scheduling and taking care of children, they may not be motivated enough (p. 2). Adults may not be familiar with the topic, resistant to learning, have too high expectations, they may not see the practical value of learning. Error correction or slow progress may also be discouraging and painful for adults (Post, 2010, p. 7). In spite of the fact that adults have the ability to abstract thinking, too many generalisations and rules may be challenging for them. It is possible for adults to concentrate on the material, which is not interesting for them, but for a short period of time (Brown, 1994, p. 94).

Experience, which is usually beneficial for adults and is used as a rich source in peer-learning, may also have a negative effect. When adults rely too much on previous experience, they may reject new information if it does not correlate with what they have learnt before (Post, 2010, p. 5). Taron and Yule (1989) warn about cases when some adults expect traditional formal classes, which they have already experienced before (p. 10). When adults encounter a different approach, which requires teamwork, taking responsibility for their own learning, they may have negative reaction ranging from open resentment to silent disobedience (Taron and Yule, 1989, p. 10). By contrast, there are cases, when adults have negative experience of learning a foreign language at a university as students. For instance, they are against using only English in class, do not approve of textbooks, reject the role of a teacher as a facilitator, and then later, when they become lecturers, reflect on their experience and teach differently, trying to use another approach (Brooks-Lewis, 2012, p. 523-524).

Russel (2017) also indicates possible environmental and emotional barriers (p. 352). Adults are more sensitive to discomfort caused by the temperature, lighting, noise level, etc. They may have hearing, vision or other impairments, which inevitably affect the learning making adults insecure and limiting their access to information. Consequently, adults may refuse to participate in particular learning activities in order to avoid discomfort. An emotional barrier is especially difficult to detect. Nevertheless, it is possible to overcome it by establishing friendly relationships between the adult educator and learners (Russel, 2017, p. 352).

Taron and Yule (1989) describe three possible variants of teachers' behaviour when adults still resent to participation in interactive activities (p. 9). In case there are just a few such learners, it is possible to ignore their initial negative reaction and persuade them to join the majority; if a large group of learners has a negative attitude towards interactive methods, then teachers follow the traditional path trying to meet their needs. The third variant consists of compromising, combining the traditional way of teaching with novel elements, so that learners adjust to new methods gradually (Taron and Yule, 1989, p. 9). Hughes and McLarty (2016) write about unpredictable reaction of older learners to some methods and materials which requires experimenting with what works and what does not (p. 19). Such practice of balancing between meeting the needs of adult learners and seeking for new effective methods leads to the eclectic approach when an educator tries and chooses most effective techniques without adhering to a certain single theory (Taron and Yule, 1989, p. 10).

Teaching adults means that oftentimes there is no traditional classroom but the adult learner's office or a factory floor. In case of a business trip, it may be a lesson over the phone or via skype which requires flexibility of an adult educator to be ready to achieve the goals of a lesson anyway. Besides learners themselves, there may be other stakeholders like the head of the training, the managing director of the company, whose interests should also be taken into consideration. In addition to conducting needs analysis of adult learners, in a business context it is necessary to learn more about the company culture in order to fit into a new environment and make learning more effective (Hughes and McLarty, 2016, p. 13).

Post (2010) claims that in order to overcome barriers to learning, adult educators should be aware of possible reasons, which motivate adults to learn and use this knowledge to develop curriculum and design instruction (p. 4). As soon as adults set the goals, they want to practice what they have learnt and see the results. Therefore, adult educators should uncover connections between the training and the goals, and at the same time provide the evidence of the progress for learners. The researcher lists four reasons and claims that it is impossible to make adults learn unless they want to develop a new skill, acquire information, fulfil their inner desires and improve professional competence (Post, 2010, p. 4). Lieb (1991) names six reasons which motivate adults to learn: social relationships, external expectations, social welfare, personal advancement, escape or stimulation, and cognitive interest (p. 2). Alternatively, Hughes and McLarty (2016) highlight ten reasons, why adults learn English, which have a huge impact on planning and delivering classes: aspirations, international businesses, promotion, changing jobs, a reward for good performance, a specific job to do, documentation in English, the company language, university studies, any other reason or none at all (p. 10-11). It can be assumed that some adult learners take the course just because it is available.

Once adults start learning, it is important to keep them interested and motivated. In case adults do not practice enough, retaining of new knowledge may be shorter. Therefore, adult educators should provide opportunities for repeated practice focusing on real-life issues, which reinforce the learning of adults.

According to Post (2010), the most important elements for successful training of adults are practice, variety and reinforcement (p. 6).

In order to overcome the barriers to learning, adult educators should create a comfortable educational environment by treating adults with respect; emphasise the practical value of the training by learning more about adults' needs, using interactive activities like role plays, simulations, case study; involve the participants by teaching them how to relate the training to their real life, cooperate with each other, by presenting the material in different ways, getting feedback on their learning "enforcing the positive and redirecting the negative" (Post, 2010, p. 5-8). Pedagogical facilitation contributes not only to the learner's success, creating the atmosphere of trust, but also adult educator's personal and professional development (Ogienko, 2016, p. 88).

Class activities should be short and relevant for adults; they should be varied enough to appeal to multiple senses (Brown, 1994, p. 94). It is also important to avoid stereotypes connected with the globalisation adjusting teaching methods and materials to cultural differences of a particular educational environment and by doing that meeting the adult's needs (Brooks-Lewis, 2012, p. 525).

To ensure variety Post (2010) recommends to use co-presenting (team teaching), visual aids (PowerPoint, diagrams), note-taking and other forms of written participation, encourage questions of different types, group discussions, brainstorming, interactive activities, structure the theoretical material, exploit supplementary handouts, guide follow-up activities, demonstrate the achievements (p. 9). Besides, in order to better meet the needs of the learners, adult educators should be flexible enough to take on-the-spot decisions and be ready to use optional activities and strategies (Post, 2010, p. 8).

One of the ways of overcoming learning barriers is a reflective approach which Richards (1996) defines as collecting data about teaching, learners' attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, teaching practices and using it for critical reflection (p. 1). The central concept of reflective teaching is asking questions, exploiting different ways of collecting information, the beliefs on the nature of teaching and learning, learning styles of adults and adult educators, criteria used for evaluation, etc. (Richards, 1996, p. 1-2). Oxford (1990) recommends the following techniques: observations, interviews, "think-aloud" procedures, note-taking, diaries or journals, self-report surveys which may be performed either by adult educators or by learners themselves thus recording their feelings, achievements, difficulties, etc. (p. 193). Richards (1996) lists the advantages of reflective teaching: it allows adult educators to make appropriate decisions, helps to get rid of routine behaviour and select effective strategies, raises awareness of processes happening in their classrooms, leads to experimenting, assessing results and finding best solutions (p. 3-4).

From the above, it can be concluded that a reflective approach to teaching is based on getting feedback from adults, which is the response to what is happening in the classroom, to learning and teaching in general. That is why adult educators should use different ways of providing feedback. It may be acknowledging a correct answer or indicating an incorrect answer, praising or criticising, expanding or modifying a learner's answer, repeating or summarising. First of all, considering the fact that any communication is purposeful, an adult educator should provide feedback on the content. Accuracy is also important but an adult educator should decide whether errors should be corrected immediately, which errors to correct and how it should be done. For instance, it is possible to use body language to indicate an error; ask an adult to repeat what was said; point out an error and ask to correct it; comment on an error and explain why it is wrong; ask others to correct an error, etc. (Richards, 1996, p. 188-189).

In order to provide feedback, adult educators should be aware of various types of indirect and direct influence. According to Reed (1998), there are four ways of indirect influence: accepting feelings by echoing what learner said; praising and encouraging by providing positive feedback; accepting adults' ideas by developing them; asking further questions requesting for additional information (p. 15). There are three ways of direct influence: lectures, instructions and negative response to an adult's contribution. Adult talk may be divided into two types: talk-response as a reaction to adult educator's questions, comments or actions, and talk-initiation, when anyone can ask a question or provide a comment (Reed, 1998, p. 15). Keeping in mind different types of indirect and direct influence, adult educators may interact with learners more effectively, engaging them in communication in spite of the barriers.

Time restriction and other responsibilities of adult life are the reasons for skipping classes and not doing the homework. While respecting learners' priorities, adult educators should give them access to the material they missed or online links to study. Adjusting homework to the needs of busy people may also be effective: for instance, a quick listening exercise or an email is possible to complete on the way to work (Hughes, 2016, p. 14). Ideally, every time adult learners should have choices about the way of doing their homework so that it would suit their learning types better.

Dinkel (2011) writes about the fact that adult educators should be aware of teaching adults with a variety of learning types. Even considering that there are three main types of learners: visuals, who learn by observing, auditorys, who learn best by listening, and kinesthetics, who learn by doing, adult educators should be ready to train a mixed group of learners. Dinkel (2011) claims that experiential learning, which is designed especially for kinesthetic learners, works best for adults. Therefore, all types of adult learners may benefit from learning by doing which includes tactile memories of touching and moving (Dinkel, 2011).

At the same time implementing experiential learning should be carefully planned. According to Bries (2013), any activities involving movement should consider age appropriateness and willingness of adults to take part in them. Bries (2013) recommends several activities, which can be successfully used with adult learners: while doing the task they should touch different objects, rearrange or match the cards with words, pictures, definitions, or move around the classroom or building. These activities, which involve either movement of learners or manipulations with different objects, can be easily adapted by adult educators in any educational environment.

The participants of Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) Programme can experience best practices of American adult educators. Each workshop consists of two parts: theoretical and practical so that practically every statement could be proved or tried by the participants. The theory presented by an adult educator is usually supported by multimedia presentations, videos, handouts and other visuals to make theoretical material memorable and understandable.

It is necessary to mention such an important tool as “equity sticks” which is widely used by American adult educators to choose a volunteer, a person to answer a comprehensive question, organise teams, etc. Equity sticks are pieces of wood or paper with the names of all participants, sometimes with additional information like hobbies, reasons to study, goals, etc., which may be useful especially at the beginning of the course when an adult educator does not know much about the adult learners. By means of using the names, it is possible to establish a friendly atmosphere from the very beginning. Equity sticks ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate in different activities despite their willingness, age, nationality, etc.

Before the practical part participants are randomly divided into teams: using equity sticks or according to the colours or numbers on the folders. Adult educators should be sure not to have the same people working together in groups or pairs. The results of teamwork are presented in different ways, and usually participants have choices: the outcome could be a wallboard, poster or skit. For instance, posters are put on display by the end of the class for everyone to assess the work of others, so it becomes truly wall-to-wall learning. Under the guidance of American adult educators TEA, participants get used to peer- and self-assessment. After demonstrative classes and presentations, adult educators usually monitor debriefing as part of assessment and reflective practice (Claremont Graduate University TEA Programme, 2012).

Conclusions

Understanding learning barriers and reasons which motivate adults is necessary for adult educators to develop curriculums and design instruction in order to facilitate reaching their educational goals. Adult learning barriers are divided into dispositional, situational and institutional. Some researchers also distinguish environmental and emotional barriers.

There is no definite approach to teaching adults which proved to be effective in removing barriers to learning. Instead, practice of balancing between meeting the needs of adult learners and choosing the methods that work without following one particular theory, leads to the eclectic approach, which may combine learner-centred teaching, content-centred teaching, reflective teaching, cooperative learning, experiential learning and even traditional teaching. Best practices of American adult educators include: theory followed by practice; equal participation; teamwork; providing choices; different types of assessment; reflection which ensure practice, variety and enforcement.

Research questions that could be asked include defining specific methods for diverse groups of adult learners involved in Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, Business English, Adult Secondary Education or vocational education.

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