A STUDY ON ADULT EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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Nowadays, the learning can be considered as a student responsibility being its self-development critical. It is expected that students as apprentices have the responsibility for their own learning. Also, our society, due to its ongoing change, puts pressure on the adult learning to stress individual skills concerning how to apply available knowledge and cope with change.

By its own nature, distance learning allows to consider each individual apprenticeship as the ability to control personal and situational issues in order to learn effectively. Current literature confirms the vision of distance apprenticeship as an adult oriented task.

However, there are many barriers as the case of the conflicting roles of the apprentice and the adult. This means that a "humble" role of apprentice can be difficult to play considering the respectable and autonomous role of a mature adult. The adult requires some respect, to be engaged and personal control.

The paper poses a number of issues to be considered when dealing with adult education in a distance learning environment. It also advances the need for a discussion that informs the proposal of an apprentice profile to assist the selection of individuals best fitted to distance education practices.

1   Adult Education and Learning: an Andragogic Approach

Our ability to learn by ourselves is a strong requirement considering distance education. An autonomous apprentice is one that is able to identify a learning need or be able to select which information to get when confronted with a particular problem. This can be named as a learning skill concerning the ability to effectively use personal resources and environment opportunities [6].

Nowadays, learning has a transient character. Our study will focus on this particular problem, where we attempt to contribute to the development of some practical guidelines to foster specific skills dealing with the transient nature of learning. These skills need to assist individuals on their development considering ongoing technological and scientific progress [2]. This way, a viable approach is to develop new skills that help individuals to proactively cope with ongoing change [8]. We must note that it is no longer possible to consider education as a temporary process in which an individual must be engaged until is adult life. The rapid growing of available knowledge, the opportunities open by the information and communication technologies and the need to high demanding markets based on information turn increasingly important to consider lifelong learning issues [1].

But, what do we know about the learning adult specific characteristics?

During the sixties, new knowledge about adult learning has been produced. In particular about learning processes and developing stages, emerging a new adult learning theory. Knowles proposes the concept of "*andragogy*" to make a distinction between adult learning and children learning. This theory of adult learning becomes a new approach to the construction of curricula and a new experimental method for learning with a vast amount of work produced [4].

Lindeman (1926, in [4]) defends adult education as a process where individuals became aware of the importance and role of experience, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Lindeman KEY HYPOTHESIS

1.	adults motivation to learn is based on their needs, experience and learning expectations
2.	adult learning orientation is life-centered
3.	experience is the most richest source for adult learning
4.	adults have a strong feeling of being self oriented
5.	individual differences increase with age

Adapted from [4]

The learning focus is on the individual and its self-development. It is expected that each apprentice assumes its responsibility about its own learning. The learning process, centered in the apprentice individual needs, requires an educators approach more oriented to the facilitator and/or guide roles, instead of knowledge guardians [3].

Andragogy can be taken as an oriented approach which allows, according to Knowles [3], the enumeration of a set of parameters to guide and promote learning, starting from integration and motivation issues and experience gathered from current individuals contexts. As Jarvis (1987, in [7]) points out that learning is not a psychological process where the apprentice work in isolation but is related and integrated with the environment. Due to these factors, distance education has been associated to adult learning both on practice and in literature, in particular understanding and finding out answers to the needs of adult apprentices [10]; the way individuals deal with change [9, 10] and their personal expectations and needs [9]. Taking into account these studies, there is a need to discuss the characteristics that an apprentice profile must include to maximise learning, considering distance learning for adults.

2   Contributions to the discussion of the apprentice profile

Taking into account the learning focus on the learner and his/her self-development, we can expect that apprentices take by their own the learning responsibility. Such a learning process, centred on each apprentice needs, place educators more as facilitates or learning guides than as knowledge repositories as defended by Knowles [3].

Considering andragogy as a system of premises concerning apprentices, they allow the definition of a new set of parameters to help promoting the learning [3]. Those situations are made possible by integrating experiences made available by existent contexts. As pointed out by Merriam [7] the learning is not a psychology process where the apprentice life in a box, isolated from the world. On the contrary, the apprentice is related and is influenced by the world.

Considered these factors – of an open system situation – distance education has been associated to adult education, both in practice and in literature. As adult education needs a closer approach, more flexible, that the one provided by existent university offerings, distance education as being considered more flexible. Well known examples are the open universities, where there are no academic or age criteria to restrict enrolment. Such Open University programs also offer more flexibility on schedules, curricula and educations methods [5].

Understand and find an answer to adult apprentices needs is one of the most researched items in distance education literature, in special in what concern to what are the individual differences. Considering experience and its influence to education, this factor can be an advantage to new learning as, also, a problem [10]. A number of other important issues must be taken into account as anxiety, the way the apprentice deals with change and existing values such as competence, autonomy, the human relationships, personal goals and integrity [9, 10]. Also important is the need to each one feels interest and be appreciated [9]. If an adult apprentice has little autonomy, feel it self uncomfortable and less motivated, and if he/she is confronted with more responsibility concerning his/her learning this may cause more anxiety and results on drop out situations [10].

Wallace [11] reports that the main reasons for adult apprentices choose Distance Education are the opportunity to learn from home, and to try new education methods. Additionally, more than the interest on making a distinction between barriers and benefits of using distance education; the same author suggests that apprentices who choose distance education because this way they are better compatible with their learning style. It seems that a study on adult learning and distance education is of interest, both considering their tight relationship and the potential to address some of the challenges that we need to cope in the knowledge and information society.

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