

Reflexivity in Adult Education: Some Theoretical Elements for a Debate

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ABSTRACT

Starting from John Dewey's assertions regarding the effectiveness of the most suitable educational strategies to encourage the growth and development of intelligence, the article aims to show the relevance of "reflective thinking" for the adult education perspective in order to evidence how the planning of training activities aimed at adults must necessarily relate to the levels of autonomy and motivation for learning by students and be inspired by criteria of flexibility and content transaction. In particular, we will try to show how education in the reflexivity of thought is necessarily related to the need to pay particular attention to satisfying the legitimate aspirations of social, cultural and economic development of learners through paths and procedures aimed at building suitable occasions and environments for development of learning processes.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Autonomy, Motivation, Adult Learning, Andragogy

INTRODUCTION

In "How We Think", a 1910 work dedicated to the methods of selection and organization of the most suitable conditions to favor the growth and development of intelligence, John Dewey commensurate the correctness and effectiveness of heuristic and educational strategies to the ability to guarantee the freedom, spontaneity and self-expression of the individual, preserving and perfecting his reflective attitude and increasing natural attitudes to curiosity, attention, observation and research. Against any form of "falsely logical" imposition of disciplines and knowledge, regardless of the subject's intellectual inventiveness and creative imagination, he strenuously opposed training activities that emphasized the transmission and mechanical acquisition of "skills" to at the expense of autonomy, intuition and individual interpretative skills. Nothing is really recognized except in so far as it has actually been understood: also through lapidary affirmations like this, the Author denounced the arbitrariness and fallacy of procedures purely oriented towards the assimilation and automatic application of "given" rules, for understanding and solving problems, such as the inhibition of the intellectual vitality and cognitive potential of the learner, caused by the superficial, conventional or "dogmatic" imposition of previously organized forms of knowledge.

In this perspective, the enhancement and implementation of the "native capital" of resources, that the learner has *per se*, are necessary for the "success" of training: curiosity, suggestions, ideas and, above all, the motivations that push the individual to give an orderly direction to his thought, represent the course of the educational process and exclude absolutisms or mechanical *routines*. As he says,

“Reflective thought is truly educative in value [...] Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought [...] Thinking is not a case of spontaneous combustion; it does not occur just on "general

principles." There is something specific which occasions and evokes it [...] The data at hand cannot supply the solution; they can only suggest it. What, then, are the sources of the suggestion? Clearly past experience and prior knowledge. If the person has had some acquaintance with similar situations, if he has dealt with material of the same sort before, suggestions more or less apt and helpful are likely to arise. But unless there has been experience in some degree analogous, which may now be represented in imagination, confusion remains mere confusion. There is nothing upon which to draw in order to clarify it. Even when a child (or a grown-up) has a problem, to urge him to think when he has no prior experiences involving some of the same conditions, is wholly futile [...] Given a genuine difficulty and a reasonable amount of analogous experience to draw upon, the difference, par excellence, between good and bad thinking is found at this point. The easiest way is to accept any suggestion that seems plausible and thereby bring to an end the condition of mental uneasiness [...] Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance. Reflective thinking, in short, means judgment suspended during further inquiry; and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful [...] The most important factor in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion, and in mastering the various methods of searching for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur. To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry these are the essentials of thinking" (Dewey, 1910, ed. 1997: 12-13).

About a century later, the Dewey reflection proves to be extremely pressing and current: however little, the learner something knows. From this "something" the teacher must to leave, to effectively educate anyone. Already, from a pedagogical and didactic point of view, the need to increase in students creative skills and research skills aimed at facing the precariousness, complexity and continuous evolution of knowledge that rejects schematic and rigid disciplinary classifications is highlighted. Consequently, the application of "standards" to solve problematic situations gives way to discovery-oriented methodologies; the nomothetic and causal representation of the teaching-learning relationship is replaced by the idiographic, contingent and procedural one; the contents take on an instrumental value to amplify the cognitive structures of the learner; the initiation of assessment processes of the quality, effectiveness and significance of the activities carried out with respect to interests, concrete experience and the degree of involvement of the learners is enhanced. Consistent with the assumption that the acquisition, learning and organization of knowledge are not attributable to "speculative" exercises, but represent tools for a progressive definition of experience in the light of "open" and "flexible" conceptual categories, the present article aims to offer a contribution to reflection on these issues by circumscribing their implications for the adult education perspective. In particular, we will try to show how education in thought reflexivity is necessarily related to the level of motivation and adult autonomy for learning and cannot be separated from the transaction and negotiation processes of the activities undertaken for this purpose.

DISCUSSION

Adult learning between pedagogy and andragogy: analogies or differences?

Adult's knowledge is rooted in his personal history and in that of the community to which he belongs. Any change, determined by learning, needs to be placed in a perspective of meaning with respect to this dimension. The adult does not learn by mechanically adding new knowledge to that in his possession but by modifying it when he is motivated, when he feels

the need to do it in order to be able to more effectively deal with real life problems (Angori, 2000).

Although the programmatic indications for adult education, at least for a certain period, have emphasized the importance of acquiring "minimum requirements" functional to reading, comprehension of texts and written communication, determined by the need to combat high rates of illiteracy, the need's awareness of pay particular attention to satisfying the legitimate aspirations of social, cultural and economic development of learners, is increasingly becoming established through paths and procedures aimed at building suitable environments for the development of learning processes. To this end, the establishment in Italy of the so-called Permanent Territorial Centers (CTP), which took place with Ministerial Ordinance 455/1997, represents a particular example. Today more than ever, CTPs occupy a leading position within the training segment aimed at Italian and foreign adults and young adults. Since their creation, CTPs have characterized themselves as places for reading needs, planning, concertation, activation and governance of education and training initiatives aimed at the adult population. The CTP Training Offer is essentially divided into three areas: courses aimed at acquiring the first cycle of education (middle school); language and social integration courses for foreigners; functional literacy courses (mainly foreign language and basic computer courses). Many CTPs pursue, in continuity with the provisions of the legislation that established them, also collateral purposes which result in activities of: reception, listening and orientation; primary functional and return literacy, also aimed at possible access to higher levels of education and professional training; development and consolidation of basic skills and specific knowledge; recovery and development of cultural and relational instrumental skills suitable for active participation in social life; acquisition and development of a first professional training or retraining; return to the education and training pathways for marginalized individuals. CTPs activities are open to all adults, Italian and foreign, without the final qualification for the first cycle of education, as well as those adults who, despite having a qualification, intend to return to education and training.

The task of the training action is, that is, to support the full implementation of the adult's need for self-fulfillment and to encourage the removal of any obstacles to critical reflection on knowledge and the capitalization of his previous experiences. If one considers that learning is an active, aware, self-regulated and "sensitive" process to the conditions put in place to promote it, one cannot overlook the fact that - as Dewey himself claims - the impulse to learn, to looking for new knowledge, arises from the determination of a phase shift between one's existential needs and the state of reality in response to the former: that is, the individual perceives the need to change their behavior in order to intervene in reality in different forms, such to be modified and brought to meet specific requests.

Many of the assumptions promoted by andragogy support this thesis: the "mature" individual accumulates a growing reserve of experiences which constitutes an important resource for learning and a broad "basis" to which to relate new propensities; the will to learn is increasingly oriented towards the fulfillment of tasks related to social roles and is not the product of biological development or school "pressures"; knowledge is directed to immediate application; the adult "self" evolves from a dependent personality to a self-directed personality.

Indeed, the plausibility of these principles is the basis of a lively debate that has produced, from 1920 onwards, oppositions and supports to the andragogy approach attributable, in a nutshell, to: difference in philosophy, classification and values underlying the term "adult education"; etymological inaccuracies of the term andragogy; the peculiarity of education as a fundamental process not limited to personal variables; the notion of self-directed learning;

the fact of conceiving the andragogy as a specific "technique" for teaching or as a learning theory.

For the purpose of proposing andragogy as a unified theory of adult education, it is not negligible, however, the fundamental analysis of the "apparent" opposition between it and pedagogy, by virtue of generalizations on behavior exclusively based on 'Age' of learners. Indeed, the attempt to circumscribe and identify the specific area of investigation of andragogy on the basis of a theoretical distinction, which would contrast the "singularity" and typicality of the adult with that of the child or young student, is rather complex, especially in relation to difficulty of reaching an operational definition of "adulthood"; if anything, the difference could be related to methodological-didactic issues.

The pedagogical model, argued Malcolm Knowles (1980), concerns the "transfer" of information and skills: the teacher "decides" the subject's cognitive needs in advance, classifies the contents into sequential logical units and selects the tools to "instill" notions. On the contrary, in the andragogic model the teacher is concerned with "procuring" opportunities and useful resources to "help" the student, facilitating the processes of change and *actively involving* him in a process characterized by a "climate" conducive to acquisition and by mechanisms of *mutual* planning, programming, choice and evaluation of learning outcomes.

From the "transmission" to the "trans-action", therefore: the dimension of "reciprocity" is the common denominator of the educational action inspired by "re-adaptation" of training opportunities to unexpected or tacit needs of the student in the various phases of planning, delivery and assessment. It is on this point that the clear opposition between pedagogy and andragogy is revealed, as mentioned, in all its apparent "criticality" and raises a series of questions.

Is it sufficient to hypothesize real or presumed "existential" differences (between adults and children) to legitimize differentiations in educational practice? Does this absolutely guarantee the effectiveness of the teacher's work? Does the hypothesis of self and hetero-direction to learning really serve to discriminate and fix the general principles which inspire training activities? Is it not true that the adult's self-directed learning ability is extremely variable? And, conversely, is it not equally reasonable the idea that the child can, in turn, take advantage of the ability to "critically" control every environment, formal or informal, set up for learning?

The answer to these and other questions gives reason for the substantial equivalence between pedagogy and andragogy, supported by John Rachal, on the basis of a review of the literature on the topic and an analysis of the experimental data available: "Taken as a whole, the trend of the available empirical literature runs counter to many of the anecdotal and expository claims for andragogy's superiority over pedagogical approaches. In general, the bulk of the experimental and quasi-experimental work done to date suggests an approximate equivalence between andragogical approaches and pedagogical ones on both achievement and learner satisfaction. Andragogical methods do not transform an educator bereft of instructional ability into a paragon of teaching effectiveness; no rare pedagogues inescapably doomed to a sterile didacticism. Pedagogy is not, after all, synonymous with pedantry. Ultimately, practitioners will continue to employ methods that work for them. But advocacy of andragogy as a superior strategy for facilitating adult learning does not seem to be borne out by the existing empirical studies, however imperfect those studies may be" (Rachal, 1994: 26). Both the pedagogical approach and the andragogical approach - notes Russell Knudson - have something to offer: "Like the Chinese symbol of yin and yang, they are at the same time opposites and complements and equally necessary" (1980: 8).

The "person" who learns excludes, in practice, considerations of "species" or "genus"; rather, it requires a "holistic" regard effectively aimed at the prompt and accurate consideration of all the complex and multi-dimensional subjective variables that govern the effectiveness and efficiency of the training intervention. And this is perhaps the sense of term *humanagogy*, coined by Knudson himself: "as theory of learning that takes into account the differences between people of various ages as well as their similarities. It is not a theory of *kind*, but a theory of *degree*" (1979: 261).

Reflective thinking and motivation to learn: the signs of andragogy

Traditional educational models have often kept distinct "creativity" and "rationality", underestimating the social and intersubjective nature of training and the organic and interdependent character of the different processes and aspects of cognitive activity and learning. For this reason they proposed a de-contextualized and objectifying language, distinct from the everyday one, and, in some ways, sanctioned the "secondary nature" of the pupils with respect to the teacher, replacing the dialogical exchange with the linear sequence of the activities and disavowing the educational value of the difference and multiplicity of ideas, values and styles of thought of each student (Cosentino, 1998). Even the andragogic perspective, one might say, has fallen victim to this "reverse order". Probably due to a terminological question or a basic misunderstanding, which, as mentioned, has reduced its meaning to "reparation" interventions in favor of illiterate subjects, belonging almost to a "neglected species", no longer registered "Schoolchildren" yet needing to master synthetically and quickly, for social and work purposes, intellectual means, adult education has long skipped its essential function: discovering the "liveliness" and dynamism of the educational process, intrinsically linked to the daily experience, previous knowledge and values assimilated by the individual, regardless of the entry into traditionally defined areas of literacy or formal education. With adult students, said Knowles, one should always start from the point where they are starting, in terms of interests, questions, problems and concerns; the adult learns from experience and prefers to learn what compared to experience can have immediate functionality.

The "essence" of reflective thought lies precisely in this: the acquisition of new knowledge cannot fail to take into account the supply of knowledge that the mind already possesses; reflexive thinking generally originates from the composition of internal and external stimuli to the individual himself and, in particular, from the emergence of practical needs and concrete problems to which the individual must provide solutions, characterizing not only strictly scientific investigation operations or techniques, but also, and above all, the ordinary operations that make up the daily life of each person. In this perspective, the individual available cognitive heritage presides to the organization of the training experience: programmatic uniformity gives way to curricular differentiation; the experiences of the person are similar to a "textbook"; the teacher, from an "authoritative oracle", assumes the new function of "guide" of learning based on the practical needs of the learners. The stability and effectiveness of an adult education system is therefore based on the ability to "invent" and "creatively renew" the training activities with respect to the particular needs of each student: what is taught must be placed in a profitable context of predefined experience for give life to a reorganization of knowledge.

Essential, in the search for possible strategies that really favor the activation of "participatory" and "bi-directional" educational paths, is the adult's motivation to learn. As is known, beyond the instinctive drive to satisfy primary needs, the motivational level of a subject consists of a cognitive and "volitional" aspect that guides the conduct towards the achievement of certain purposes and is strictly related to its aspirations; instead of being

forced or solicited by others, the individual "proposes" to act to respond effectively to his interests, preferences and multiple and diverse social "questions". The need to learn is strongly conditioned by motivational and social variables, such as curiosity, the desire to improve knowledge, self-esteem, quality of life, job satisfaction.

In this regard, David Kolb, a well-known exponent of *Experiential Learning*, considers conceptualization and the abstract manipulation of symbols for the development of learning insufficient: this is defined in terms of a process in which family life, the roles played in daily life, awareness, autonomy and the inner world of the person are determining factors of the need for training. In particular, building upon earlier work by John Dewey, the Author believes "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984: 38). The theory presents a cyclical model of learning, consisting of four stages: 1) Concrete experience (the learner actively experiences an activity such as a field work); 2) Reflective observation (the learner consciously reflects back on that experience); 3) Abstract conceptualization (the learner attempts to conceptualize a theory or model of what is observed); 4) Active experimentation (the learner is trying to plan how to test a model or theory or plan for a forthcoming experience).

Similarly, the growing reserve of experience and the emotional experience of the adult person constitute an increasingly fertile ground in which to "sow" new learning. As Paul Lengrand (1970) argues, the "functionality" is one of the essential expressions of motivation. Education cannot be carried out effectively in the void of abstraction, in accordance with hypothetical purposes, but must be connected to the strongest interests of life. In short, in the andragogic model people will not learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. This requires overcome inhibitions and beliefs about learning for letting learners know why something is important to learn and showing learners how to direct themselves through information relating to life's experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Autonomy of learning and formative negotiation: what implications for teachers?

In the preface to his book, David Ausubel stated: "If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly" (1968: VI). With this exhortation, the Author, a scholar of effective communication and of the determinants of learning, invited the teachers to develop the ability to arouse "vital interests" in the student and to consider their autonomy in the choice and realization of understanding processes and construction of meanings.

Indeed, the arguments carried out so far have tried to show how learning in adulthood pursues the achievement of "tangible" results through the acquisition and increase of tools suitable for expanding the person's internal potential. In other words, adult learning is "specific" and "significant": past experience and cognitive strategies previously developed represent a potential for further expansion. The adult student who approaches a new learning experience takes time and energy to evaluate if the educational proposals meet their interests and claims an active participation in the selection, processing and use of the knowledge that he considers most congruent with his need. So, the significance of learning is related to the degree of integration of the knowledge learned to the overall picture of the individual's experiences and interests. The same learning is intended as an increase and qualitative modification, not a simple quantitative addition, compared to the learning processes previously carried out. We have already mentioned the different characterization of the teacher who, at this level, is configured as a "promoter" and "negotiating activator" of learning: the uniqueness of the

training gives way to the collaborative unity of the training decisions. The adult's education redeems themselves from the traditional compensatory function of students' deficits, inadequacies and gaps, related to their previous experiences. In short, the cognitive growth of the adult cannot be "trained": training aimed at the complete development of individual resources cannot exempt the teacher from constructive and assertive interaction with the student and from the active involvement of the latter in modification and enrichment of skills and competences available. Rather than professionals in teaching the disciplines, would be needed specialists in teaching "intelligence", experts in cognitive processes and good communicators, able to build effectively significant human relationships. The definitive overcoming of the "subjection" experienced by adult education with respect to rules, learning conditions and didactic devices of a "primary" nature, therefore, passes through a review of the contents, forms and methods of the training process. The active attitude and the involvement of the student's beliefs, visions, behaviors, cognitive schemes and affectivity in activities aimed at learning general and multiple skills and the modification of cognitive-behavioral repertoires, presupposes possession of particular communicative and relational skills on the part of teachers. This latter are asked to shift their attention to the variety of "collateral" supports and devices to the sterile and ritual transmission of mere notions. For example, the educational experience could not be "shared" if the teacher's language was completely inadequate and detached from the understanding abilities and cognitive context of the interlocutor, strongly influenced, moreover, by his social and cultural position.

Many terms, as we know, are conventionally clear only to those who conventionally stipulated and defined them and, therefore, know the "objects" to which they refer. Certainly, in the relationship between teacher and student, the use of intersubjectively valid concepts strongly contrasts with the specificity and rigor of scientific language, strictly depends on the expressive possibilities and, therefore, on the "spoken" language by the two interlocutors; in fact, there could be no experience if the person speaking does not participate in the situations we are talking about. In addition, are equally important: the ability to observe, decode and adapt the teacher's communication functions to the student's mimic, gestural and proxemic language; the assumption of an empathic attitude, truly available to active listening; the recognition and conscious management of the personality, expectations and even prejudices of the student, for the purpose of planning "flexible" activities and appropriate to the representative methods of the learners.

The aim of the education, Carl. Rogers argued, is above all to "facilitate" change and learning by recognizing the subject's autonomy and responsibility for defining objectives, choosing and evaluating the effectiveness of the training itinerary. Through the active elaboration of the proposed contents, each student "produces his own knowledge", interacts and devises original and fruitful ways of connecting and organizing the contents and procedures proposed by the teacher through a continuous comparison, consolidation and verification of these with the knowledge already possessed: "Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.

learning which involves the whole person of the learner is the most lasting and pervasive. Independence, creativity and self-reliance are all facilitated when evaluation by others is of secondary importance. The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience" (Rogers, 1969: 114).

The specific "relational" dimension of an educational model of this type, free from "indoctrination" or pseudo-user-centered attitudes and, as such, characterized by the mutual conditioning of predefined roles and behaviors (the teacher as "expert" - the student who "asks for help") and from the presentation of contents that are not interpreted but transmitted

"fideistically", really assigns a procedural, intersubjective value to the training, concretely oriented towards the change and creativity of the two protagonists: the teacher who, in function of each specific situation, it "problematically" builds contents; the student who offers himself "dialectically" and to the best of his wealth and potential. As say Rogers, "I see the facilitation of learning as the aim of education, the way in which we develop the learning man, the way in which we can learn to live as individuals in the process. I see the facilitation of learning as the function which may hold constructive, tentative, changing, process answers to some of the deepest perplexities which beset man today. The teacher, is a real person in his relationship with his student. He's a person to his students, not a faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement, nor a sterile tube through which knowledge is passed from one generation to another" (1983: 105-106).

In summary, if you can consider the learner as a person experiencing a development process, then you are able to confirm or realize his or her potential. Otherwise the student would be equated to a manipulable mechanical "object". The richness and complexity of this statement satisfies the intent, prefigured at the beginning of this work, to reiterate, beyond the ambiguities and the wide variety of normative references on the subject, the main purpose of adult education: to promote, as well as the acquisition and development of "basic" skills, "transversal" processes of self-education, self-orientation and reorganization of personal conscience urging the subject who learns to renew the idea he has of himself and to discover himself an actor and builder of a series of "intentional worlds", that of life, that of social relations, that of cognition, that of the working profession, closely interconnected with each other.

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