

Solient Features of Didactics of Adult Education – A Modern Approach in 2021



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KEYWORDS: Adult Education, Didactics, Pedagogy, Teaching Staff, Digitalization

DIDACTICS AND ADULT EDUCATION

First of all the term adult education should be defined. According to the definition of the German Education Council (1970)¹, adult education/continuing education today is understood to be the "continuation or resumption of organized learning after completion of a first phase of education of varying scope (ibid., p. 197)". Didactics does not only mean the selection of methods, but it also includes planning the respective content to be taught, defining and setting learning objectives, as well as the subsequent evaluation of the course unit (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 2). Didactics can be described as the competence to teach learners competently, comprehensively, and thoroughly: Didactic models can focus on content of instruction, models of teaching, and teaching staff (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 3). With regard to adult education, these models have been applied late compared to the other educational sectors because adult education is oriented less to state curricula but to the needs and lifeworld of its target groups.

Models of didactics that have gained acceptance in the field of adult education are:

"educational didactics,
teaching-learning didactics,
curriculum-theoretical didactics, identity-theoretical didactics
and enabling didactics." (Gundermann, 2019, p. 3).

The principles of adult education with regard to didactics are firstly orientation to the participants, secondly orientation to the target groups, and thirdly orientation to experience (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 3).

The premise of all didactics is that it is assumed that every learning process requires design. It follows that providing knowledge and information is not enough and that participants cannot be expected to learn without guidance and support (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 4). The so-called didactic triangle clarifies the approaches and scope of didactics. While at the top is the subject, the other two sides are occupied by the teacher as well as the learners. The learners are identical with the target group, whereas the topic can also be called content as well as the teacher is responsible for planning and structuring the process of teaching and learning (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 4). Another dimension is the environment that affects the teaching-learning situation and the people involved.

It is important to first understand learning as a process that is experienced by the individual and for which support can only be provided from outside (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 5). Where learners can build on experiences, this can have a positive effect on their learning process. Where learning is arranged, the practical didactics is responsible, which makes the method selection, the selection or the creation of the learning materials.

Course communication should not only include speaking clearly and imparting knowledge, but also moderating discussions, responding to questions and different points of view, advising learners, and recognizing and resolving conflicts. The basis for this communication should be respect and trust (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 5). The teaching staff should use feedback or short checklists to determine how their own actions affect the design of the seminar and the transfer of knowledge as well as the participants. In addition, learning objectives should be formulated so that they can be compared at the end of the course. Obtaining feedback at the beginning of the seminar minimizes the risk of not meeting the (possibly not formulated) expectations and interests of the participants.

The fact that the teacher is relevant to learning success was established by educational researcher John Hattie. This finding was initially related to the area of schools, but has now also become established in adult education. Requirements for teachers are the

¹ See <https://www.ph-ludwigsburg.de> (accessed Nov. 11, 2020).

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use of understandable language, credibility and good self-organization; in addition, they should communicate the learning objectives in an understandable way (cf. Gundermann, 2019, p. 6).

SCIENCE AND PRACTICE

Teachers who teach educational programs in adult education and have an interest in successful, effective teaching of content can acquire knowledge in the context of subject didactics or obtain information from empirical teaching-learning research (cf. Schrader, 2018, p. 33). For example, language teachers could improve their teaching by integrating more elements that correspond to the learners' life practice and that are more communicative, in the sense that the participants more actively shape the conversational situations instead of merely varying the given sample as is often the case.

Where intercultural problems arise in teaching practice, knowledge about pedagogical ethics should be available to deal with these problems or conflicts appropriately (cf. Schrader, 2018, p. 33). It is not enough to be guided by general ethics, but the teaching person should "act in an ethically responsible way" (Schrader, 2018, p. 33). This is the case when the teaching content is oriented to the facts and is accordingly true, and it can also be expected of the participants.

In the context of courses for refugees, for example, in the form of integration courses, teachers can create principles based on pedagogical ethics that ensure good handling of intercultural problems. These principles are observed and applied so that, as a result, the learning process in the course situation does not stall but, on the contrary, experiences an acceleration (cf. Schrader, 2018, p. 34).

Science can, this became clear on the basis of the explanations, positively influence practice, i.e. it can make a contribution to success. On the part of teachers, it should be noted that the transmission of knowledge and education is not based on talent, but "it (is) a competence that can be learned." (Schrader, 2018, p. 34). Learning this mediating activity involves first acquiring knowledge, then practice is needed within which training and refinement of teaching techniques occur. Finally, the practical experience should be reflected upon with the aim of considering where further improvement of the teaching activity should take place.

It is not enough to merely gain knowledge that encompasses the theory of the subject or area being taught. It is also not enough to know the methods to be used to convey the knowledge. What is crucial is professional practice combined with reflection. Teachers are not helped if they have scientific knowledge. In their pedagogical practice, it is important to increase the possibilities of the participants (cf. Schrader, 2018, p. 34).

TEACHING STAFF AND DIGITIZATION

Koschorreck and Gundermann (2020) conduct a review on the topic of implications caused by digitalization for teachers employed in adult and continuing education. The goal was to conduct a Critical Review based on a synthesis of 41 empirical studies and literature. These articles date from 2016 to 2019 (see Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 159). The adult and continuing education sector, which is not adequately funded compared to the school-based sectors and higher education, is characterized by a very diverse structure, e.g., in the form of adult education centers and institutes for language learning. The same applies to the teaching staff; while only a minority has a permanent full-time position, the majority is employed either as part-time and/or freelancers (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 160).

The review determined that there is a consensus in the literature and in the studies that "digitization at least changes the requirements for competencies, if not demands new competencies" (Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 166). On the part of teachers, competencies in media pedagogy are therefore required; moreover, they must familiarize themselves not only with content, but also with various technologies. The fact that they are said to have a "competence deficit" (ibid.) can possibly be attributed to the above-mentioned types of employment, i.e. those who are only employed part-time or often rather precariously freelance may be more reluctant to invest time and money in their own continuing education.

With regard to the pedagogical attitude, it can be said that on the one hand this is formed on the basis of one's own education and training, personality, competencies, interests, etc., and that on the other hand this attitude has an effect on the handling of media and the acquisition of media pedagogical competence. All in all, teachers should build up and deepen their own competences just as much as this is demanded of the participants. In the area of academic continuing education for teaching staff, however, it should be noted that continuing education events are not offered in large numbers (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 166).

The requirements regarding the competence of teaching staff were recorded in a total of 23 topic areas, including "feedback to participants, enabling participation, media competence of teachers, dealing with uncertainty and change by teachers, and work motivation" (Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 168). The GRETA competency model, which takes into account both common theory and requirements of practice, represents a model for competency assessment for teaching staff in adult and continuing education. The abbreviation "GRETA"² stands for "Fundamentals for the development of a cross-agency recognition

² See <https://www.greta-die.de/webpages/ueber-greta> (accessed Feb. 09, 2021).

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procedure for competencies of teaching staff in adult and continuing education". Among other things, it lists partial competencies that can be applied to digitization requirements. These include, for example, "teaching/learning methods and concepts/new media" (ibid.). The other competency models explained by the authors on the basis of study results and literature are not described for reasons of space. The so-called Bertelsmann Monitor Digitale Bildung determined, based on a survey of 260 people in adult education, "that the respondents do use digital tools in a variety of ways, but primarily for preparing and following up on their own courses or for taking exams." (Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 170). Only a few tools are used in the course situation, and especially those that aim at the reception of the participants are frequently used. Moreover, these tools, e.g. videos, presentation software such as PowerPoint are used to complement the teaching.

In sum, digital learning technologies that can be an asset to adult education require a correspondingly high level of effort on the part of the organization and teaching staff. In concrete terms, this means the formation of teams to handle tasks such as licensing issues, implementation and support in terms of technology, etc. (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 170). Using the example of 13 teachers in the language field, qualitative interviews made it clear that both the interaction with participants in online language offerings and the creation of an atmosphere conducive to learning and community are experienced as challenging (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 171).

The attitude of the teaching staff is extremely relevant for the use of digital offerings (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 171). Overall, the digitization process is changing teaching practice and reducing the emphasis on the teacher, i.e. teaching itself is less focused on the teaching staff (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 172). With regard to online language learning offerings, it was possible to determine, also through qualitative interviews, that the interviewees - these were the aforementioned 13 teachers - "identified a lack of motivation and openness among teachers as a critical success factor for online offerings, linked, among other things, to a fear of change in their teaching practice." (Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 172). A quantitative study considering 119 data sets showed, among other things, that the self-assessment of the surveyed teachers is that in the future "the role of the technology expert and the instructional designer (...)" (Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 172f.) will become more important. In these very areas, teachers rated themselves as less strong and expressed a need for further training.

Since teaching and learning opportunities are currently frequently applied, also due to the closures of, among others, adult education and continuing education institutions due to the pandemic, but a lack of competencies on the part of teaching staff has nevertheless been identified (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 181), there is a consensus view that teachers should undergo continuing education and training. Although there is a willingness to do so, it cannot be said that the development of competencies proceeds uniformly and at a similar rate. Preferences regarding media use and familiarity with media seem to play a role, as does the individual level of intrinsic motivation (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 181). Since competence in relation to digital offerings is extremely important for the digitization process in education in general, teaching staff should be supported in expanding their own competencies (cf. Koschorreck & Gundermann, 2020, p. 183).

IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING STAFF IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITIZATION

In an interview contribution, the role of the teacher with regard to online learning offers is explained. The interview partner is Christian Sellmann, who is the founder of a company responsible for the online learning platform Learnity.com (cf. DIE Magazin, 2017). In addition to providing the platform, tools and software by means of which videos or webinars can be created are integrated (cf. DIE Magazin, 2017, p. 24f.). Sellmann does not see himself and the company in the role of the decision maker as to which content and offers are integrated or rejected, i.e., "there is good content, there is also bad content (...) - there the market, i.e., the users, ultimately decides on success." (DIE Magazin, 2017, p. 25).

Sellmann puts the proportion of content produced by the company itself at around two percent, i.e. the lion's share is third-party material. The platform operator only assumes responsibility for this small proportion of self-produced material (cf. DIE Magazin, 2017, p. 25). Sellmann describes reaching the target group as cost-intensive and compares the problem with conventional adult education. Overall, he advocates a pragmatic approach to creating the concepts, which is based more on considerations regarding the length of the videos and the respective combination of online material and less on sophisticated didactic concepts.

Sellmann answers the question of the quality of online videos, if they are professionally produced, on a per-video basis: "In terms of purely passive learning, well-produced videos are of a higher quality than what you find in the lecture hall." (DIE Magazine, 2017, p. 25). Although creating videos is something that even experienced teachers find challenging, the phrase "A good lecturer remains good - whether online or offline" holds true (DIE Magazin, 2017, p. 26). The future of online learning is nevertheless a limited one, i.e., online courses will not completely replace face-to-face events. A distinction can be made between content that can be easily taught and learned online and content that requires presence and the associated interactivity. The fact that adult education as a whole is approaching the topic of "online knowledge transfer" rather slowly can be attributed to the respective providers and organizers, who fear that they do not have sufficient technological competence. However, the decisive factor is not so much the technology, but the development of a concept that takes into account the didactic preparation of the learning content.

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It can therefore be said that the content and the teaching staff are more important here than technology per se (cf. DIE Magazin, 2017), p. 26).

Mastering learning processes in basic education

The study "mekoFUN" (cf. Kaiser & Kaiser, 2015, p. 9) investigates how people with learning difficulties in basic education can better manage the learning process and achieve learning success. The project of the same name explores the effect of teaching and learning on a metacognitive basis. It is a concept that focuses the learning process on the processing and solving of task fields that contain problems. The processing of the tasks involves planning, management and control. Specifically, planning refers to identifying the task and type in order to choose the appropriate approach. Control involves the individual as well as appropriate effort that is made to complete the tasks. Control is done in order to verify the results. Here the individual steps, not only the final result, are to be subjected to a control and compared with the goal, i.e. the expected result. The control also includes the examination of the strategy(s) to the effect whether these were chosen correctly and whether, if necessary, other strategies would have been more purposeful.

The aforementioned approach - referred to as metacognitive strategies - are flanked by techniques designed to support learning. These include keeping a learning diary, the self-questioning technique, and creating a portfolio. In this way, the building blocks of planning, management and control are to be used. Activities such as so-called thinking aloud in the course situation should enable the other participants to "compare their own repertoire of strategies with what they have heard and, if necessary, modify it or enrich it with new approaches." (Kaiser & Kaiser, 2015, p. 10). Here it is evident that learning processes progress through continuous effort and that learning can be learned.

The effectiveness of this didactic approach, which is referred to as "new didactics" (Kaiser & Kaiser, 2015, p. 10), was tested empirically. The experimental group consisted of so-called low-skilled learners, as did the control group, which, however, learned according to unspecific methods. At the beginning and at the end of the test, a performance test was carried out with all test persons, which included tasks for coping with everyday life, such as finding an apartment or making a complaint. As a result, this test showed that the New Didactics made a great deal of progress with the subjects who had graduated from a special or remedial school, whereas the subjects who had graduated from a secondary school benefited even more from the didactics, as they showed a very great deal of progress. The individuals with special, remedial, and junior high school diplomas in the control group showed no progress in performance. In addition, the results of the individuals with middle school diplomas of both groups did not show any significant learning progress.

This finding does not necessarily mean that people with an intermediate level of education did not benefit from the New Didactics; rather, it can be assumed that the course instructors were challenged by the group of people with a low level of education to such an extent that there was hardly any capacity left for people with a higher level of education (cf. Kaiser & Kaiser, 2015, p. 10).

With regard to nervousness and anxiety in the context of the learning and examination process, it should be noted that the experimental group at the end of the course internalized factors that promote learning. They learned to control the situation and to pursue goals with greater insistence (cf. Kaiser & Kaiser, 2015, p. 11). The control group did not show such progress. Both groups also showed a certain "learning resignation" that could not be eliminated in the experimental group either.

Being able to control a situation, i.e., the learning situation, and demonstrating greater perseverance results in greater overall performance. Basically, the experimental group demonstrated a higher level of self-efficacy, which enables the individual to believe in him/herself and confidently tackle tasks in the conviction that he/she can master them with the available resources (cf. Kaiser & Kaiser, 2015, p. 11f.).

The New Didactics can thus be described as effective for people with low qualifications (cf. Kaiser & Kaiser, 2015, p. 12). This group of people should be given the chance to receive support and increase their qualification also for reasons of participation. With an increase in qualifications, low-skilled people could both be permanently integrated into and participate in the labor market and experience stabilization at the personality level, as shown by the improvement in self-efficacy mentioned above.

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