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Part 3: Contemporary Aspects on Becoming an Adult Educator

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Why do people decide to study andragogy and what happens during their studies? A qualitative research study.

In Germany as in many countries, numerous people are actively engaged in the various fields of adult education. They are employed on a part-time or regular basis, either in a permanent position, as a free-lancer or for a fee as a consultant - or as unpaid or lowpaid volunteers. They all have very different life stories and come equipped with different educational backgrounds and professional degrees.

Within this diverse group more and more academically trained adult educators can be found. They have studied pedagogy at the University and graduated in andragogy. This paper focuses on a close-up analysis of this group of "professionals" and on two questions:

1. What was their subjective learning reason (Begriff im Original: "subjektive Lernbegründung" Ludwig 2000 und 2001) for choosing pedagogy as study topic for obtaining a University degree?
2. What do they learn, which qualifications do they acquire and, most notably, which processes of personality development do they pass through during their studies?

The following descriptions are based on the results of a qualitative dissertation initiated and finished at the University of Bamberg's Chair of Andragogy (Groß 2006). Pedagogy students were interviewed once at different time-points of their studies. Selected sub-groups were questioned twice either during their introductory or their advanced study periods. The latter were only interviewed if they graduated in andragogy. Questionnaires and research process were based on Grounded Theory (Glaser/Strauss).

First question: Why do they study pedagogy/andragogy?

People's motives for pursuing studies of pedagogy have so far been

analyzed in Germany in a quantitative and retrospective manner (Flacke/Prein/Schulze 1989, Krüger/Grunert 1998, Mägdefrau 2000, Grunert/Seeling 2003).

The results show that not only interpersonal, social, and vocation-oriented motives, but also the desire for further personal development are of importance to choose this field of study.

While these quantitative studies identify and rank the different criteria for choosing a study field, they do not allow an understanding of the personal and subjective reasons behind these individual decisions.

The qualitative-hermeneutic approach of the Bamberg research yielded a complementary result, allowing to understand that these different "motive-headlines" actually represent idiosyncratic and very complex "learning reason"-clusters that are frequently derived from the respective individuals personal and/or professional biography. The clusters of arguments so identified could be grouped into distinct types of learning reasons. The pattern describing such a type does not represent any particular person. It rather stands for a group of arguments originating from different people, but clearly belonging together.

Our research confirmed that the decision to study pedagogy/andragogy is the result of an individual and multilayered interaction of different subjective learning reasons. Especially at the beginning, but also during the course of the studies, the original learning reasons serve as motor driving the selection of specific themes and topics for the courses and specialized workshops. They hereby also influence the dedication in dealing with the individual topics and, consequently, the results obtained from learning.

The analysis of the interviews yielded one principal result:

The interviewed people do not justify their selection of the study field monocausally, but instead multicausally and complex. Their perception of the study field and the following vocation are closely intertwined. In addition, the students have a pronounced interest to learn how to "do their job" by practicing it (Groß 2004, p. 333).

The analysis of the data yielded five types of learning reasons. Some of these could even be further subdivided.

Types of learning reasons	Subdivision
social learning reason: "to work together with people"	a) altruism – the desire to help others (and oneself at the same time) b) pedagogic interest in facilitating people's development c) familiarity and closeness to people
Degree-oriented learning reason: "to obtain either a good or even better qualification"	a) high initial qualification (first course of studies) b) even higher further qualification (additional course of studies)
A personal development oriented learning reason	
A learning reason oriented on an individual's estimation of his ability to master the study or the job	optimistic and pessimistic viewpoints
"Runner-Up"-learning reason	

Type 1: Social learning reason – "to work together with people"

The 'social learning reason' is an excellent example to highlight the complexity of the qualitative conclusions derived from the results. I will therefore present this section in more detail and only briefly cover the other type.

People that begin to study pedagogy are genuinely interested in working together with or for other people - this has been studied extensively and is common accepted knowledge. But what does this rather vague and ill-defined interest really mean for the individual student, what precise ideas, which conceptions of the human being and which self-conceptions are connected to this interest?

The qualitative design of the research study allowed to identify three argument groups that, in principle, are all socially motivated, but nevertheless differ strongly from each other.

Several different arguments expressing the wish to "help other people" were grouped in the social learning reason: "*altruism – the desire to help others (and oneself at the same time)*". Interestingly, the people interviewed that give altruism as important reason for their study field selection frequently relate to past personal crises and their having experienced interpersonal and sometimes even professional

help. The triad "help needed, help received, help to give" becomes a decisive learning reason (Groß 2006, p. 112), and a strong affinity to the disciplines psychology and medicine is eye-catching. The self-experienced suffering is used here as one precondition to account for the wish to "sacrifice" oneself for other needy people - without reflecting on the necessity of personal and professional limits. To define oneself as "helper" can also mean feeling "healthy", competent, and able to work under any kind of pressure which can result in an altered and more positive self-perception. However, this should not be generalized. The future field of work is anticipated more in the line of classical social work than in adult education.

A second group of arguments led to establishing the social learning reason *"pedagogic interest in facilitating people's development"*. In contrast to altruistic motives dominated by "helping", the focus here is on "facilitating, educating and guiding" people. Students interviewed generally aspire a vocation in youth work or adult education and consequently choose andragogy for their advanced studies. Pedagogy is viewed as a professional job with clearly defined personal and professional perspectives.

The third group of arguments follows the motto *"familiarity and closeness to people"*. The wish to help people is also present in this type. However, it is based on friendship and equality. The occupation envisioned is mainly one in social work. It is not viewed as a job to do, but rather as a fun-filled extension of everyday life.

Taken together, the motif "to work with people" does not arise from a single root, but from diverse attitudes and is either seen as a "mission to help", a pedagogic professional job, or a hobby. Students that refer to the second group of arguments prefer andragogy for their advanced studies.

Type 2: Degree-oriented learning reason – "to obtain either a good or even better qualification"

Analysis of the data allowed to identify two distinct, degree-oriented learning reasons. The arguments brought forward by the students clearly differ, depending on if pedagogy is the first field studied or the second (after having prior to this graduated from a college of applied science). The type of reason "high initial qualification" stems from the desire to obtain a premium education comprising both the necessary scientific theoretical background and the relevant practical experience. On the other hand, the group that studies pedagogy as second study field generally acknowledge that the experiences they

made during the course of their first studies were either personally or professionally disappointing. They stress the need for an explicit scientific training combined with the wish to develop a unique pedagogic or andragogic identity. They also hope to obtain a higher social reputation and a better income.

Type 3: A personal development oriented learning reason

The Bamberg study also shows learning reasons that are targeted towards personal maturation and increased self-awareness and/or self-development, although the importance of this motive cluster varies strongly from person to person. Further personal development was not mentioned in any interview as having been a decisive criterion. Interestingly, the students consider a healthy degree of self-awareness a valuable and necessary key competence for a pedagogic or andragogic vocation.

Type 4: A learning reason oriented on an individual's estimation of his ability to master the study or the job

The choice to study education is also strongly influenced by the individual perception of one's intellectual and mental ability to master the requirements of both study field and future job visualized.

This capability can either be defined pessimistic ("I'll never be able to do something else") or optimistic ("this should be easy for me"). The significance of an imagined job profile for the choice of this study field was not found in any of the older quantitative analyses.

Type 5: "Second (last)-choice"-learning reason = nothing else available.

As has been frequently confirmed, a certain portion of the students of pedagogy choose this study field, because a different, and in fact preferred, study field isn't open to them, either generally or at this moment. So, what happens to these essentially negative explanations during the course of the studies? Two individual cases may serve as exemplary models demonstrating that it can, but must not automatically always, come to a reconciliation and identification with the pedagogic study field taken.

Conclusion

The decision to study as a means to establish a profession and an area of expertise in the complex fields of pedagogy and adult education is the consequence of similarly complex and subjective

learning reasons.

Second question: What development happens during the study-years?

Studying education influences and develops a way of thinking specific for this scientific discipline and characterized by an ability and willingness to analyze situations from multiple points of view.

How can we explain this developmental process?

Based on our interviews it became clear that within the subject of pedagogy, it appears to be difficult to clearly recognize and identify the knowledge one has obtained. The students experience different educational theories as complex and partially self-contradictory – and this precisely invites and requires them to reflect and discuss the topic – demanding from them to adopt a clear standpoint to focus their convictions. As one student said:

“I have the impression that one acquires a broad knowledge base in pedagogy – how do I approach a certain topic, where do I get the information, how do I present it – especially the specific way of thinking. [...]. This is a clear advantage. There is relatively little factual knowledge – you can't say “this is wrong” or “this is right” – you always have to adopt an “as well as” point of view. You can never say “these are the hard facts” and if you've learned them all you're ready for life. No, you always have to use your own brain to be able to say “this person sees it this way” and “that person sees it that way” “how do I see it” – how to find your own standpoint and that's also something I learned. [...] So, making everything transparent and visible for everyone, why I have the certain standpoint that I have.” (Ms. Müller, Int. 2, I. 172-187).

It seems as if, during the course of examining the various educational theories monopolistic single-cause explanations are more and more replaced by an complex and reflected “as-well-as” attitude. Students approaching their graduation more and more express that knowledge in terms of “that's the way it is, and that's it” is not accepted anymore. Instead, an “It depends on ...” comes to the fore. This “it” is redefined depending on the respective view-point adopted in a particular situation. The competence to assume and critically reflect different perspectives allows the students to better experience their personal and professional life-world in all its complexity and inherent necessities.

This ability is generally described as a positive trait by the students. They perceive it as “helpful” in their professional dealings with other people and, furthermore, as an enrichment for their personal development.

“I believe that I have adopted other strategies to cope with different problems and questions. Something has changed, I have become more sure in dealing with other peoples' problems, I have become more sure with myself, in knowing what I want.” (Mrs. Ober, Int. 1, I. 264-267).

Taken together, the interviews showed that (after three years of study!) the study-inherent preoccupation with andragogic and educational theories facilitates the development of and competence with multi-perspective observation and reflection. Professional pedagogic argumentation is generated in a dynamic process of theoretical examination, discussion and reflection.

The challenge of willingly adopting different view-points and the ability to really do this, transforms the students of pedagogy and andragogy during the course of their studies: they develop their personality (naturally to different extents). This process of “personal growing” is not without consequence for their self-reflection and their perception of other people in their respective everyday lives and life-world.

Thus, a pedagogic view of world and human beings frequently emerges and thrives during the course of their studies.

As I have already demonstrated, the students interviewed choose, on the basis of idiosyncratic social learning reasons, to study education. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that they already possessed a humane disposition before beginning their studies. So, it was interesting to understand how these initial ideas and images are altered in the course of their studies and how the “pedagogic view” originates.

These processes of learning and personal development can be reconstructed in a very impressive manner from one interview. During an extensive narration (Int. 2. I. 451-501), the student Mrs. Ober, who is just about to graduate (after semester 10), describes and reflects her personal and professional processes of development. In the first excerpt she emphasizes the importance of adopting different perspectives:

O.: „I believe that to be a pedagogue is to be predominantly concerned with viewing a situation or an issue from a certain perspective. Such a distinct way of viewing reality in a comprehensive and not in a tight manner, because I am convinced that it is really very wide-spread. I believe that I have become familiar with various aspects of this view during the course of my studies. I can either take up this perspective or one of several different pedagogic perspectives.“

For her, the “pedagogic view” is definitely something she learned during her studies. This different way of “seeing and reflecting” has an impact on her perception and interpretation of situations and people in everyday life. As a consequence, she experiences people and their interactions, communication and behavior in a more differentiated and context-dependent manner. Dealing with her own idea of humanity also leads to her increasingly respecting and even trying to understand the conceptions of world and human being of her vis-à-vis:

O.: “What I have just described are points of view that we applied and adopted during our studies. It is also an exercise to assume these perspectives. This question, for example: What idea of humanity does this person or this author have. Or, what idea of humanity is hidden behind the words or actions of somebody. This question was frequently asked during our studies, I have also asked it many times of myself.”

Finally Mrs. Ober marks her pedagogic concept of the world and human beings by stressing the human potential for change:

O.: “A pedagogic perception of the world and humanity accredits mankind with the potential for development. A human being is not entirely predetermined in his development and isn't complete, irrespective of his age. There is always the potential and the possibility. [...], how a person can advance and alter himself. This also needs a pedagogic conception of the human being that is not influenced by color, sex, ethnic group, etc. and does not define a person according to these criteria.”

These statements from the interview suggest that the subjective learning reasons, perceptions and constructions of world and human beings the students already come equipped with might be connected to the multiple-perspective view that is presented and learned during their studies. The competence and willingness to adopt different perspectives augments and alters the student's personality. Pedagogic and andragogic anthropology is characterized by accepting and recognizing the human being as a mature and adaptive individual capable of development. To reduce him to a one-dimensional cause-effect automaton is obviously impossible.

The development of the described changes of thinking are, in my opinion, a necessary, but also time-consuming, component of University training in education. Especially with respect to the “Bologna process” and its shortened study cycles, it is important that the students will still have to struggle with “theory” so that they can develop and hone their individual concepts of humanity and the world

to finally become professional and academically-schooled pedagogues and andragogues.

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