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Adult educators' career trajectories, learning patterns and educational philosophy – connections and/or contradictions

Abstract: Educators of adults are in a unique position among professionals in that they often have not had the opportunity to study how to do their job. Most educators of adults come into their positions through a circuitous route, one that does not include training and their development tend to come from experience and trial-and-error practice (Cranton 1996, Taylor 2003). They have had different career trajectories, different biographical backgrounds; they have experienced different learning patterns that determine their vocational practice as adult educators. Their values, beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning are shaped by their ways of understanding the world, their personal preferences and personalities. As the understanding of the personal conception of oneself as an educator and a subjective educational theory affect strongly educators' professional behaviour and activity it is important to pay more attention to the development of professional thinking and professional learning of adult educators: how the adult educators have gained the knowledge and skills they need in the field of adult education? Which kind of experiences do they have as for transformative learning process? How have they acquired the sense of professional identity as an adult educator? What do they actually learn from their experiences as educators? Which kind of beliefs, assumptions and conceptions do they have about learning and teaching adults?

Career trajectories

From the biographical perspective, the professional behaviour and activity of the educator is determined by the experience gathered during the career. In order to understand the professional behaviour and activity of an educator one has to research their professional life (Kelchtermans 1993). Teachers' experiences and background, teachers' lifestyles, life cycles and career stages, critical incidents in teachers' lives (Goodson 1994) develop the understandings of teaching and being a teacher and create the basis for practice.

The difference between a biography and other forms of narrative lies in connecting the events of personal life with social events. Life is viewed as lived at a specific time, in a specific place and within the framework of certain specific social conditions, not as a mere

collection of events (Goodson, Sikes 2001; Hatch, Wiesniewski 1995).

This presentation introduces research based on narratives and photo-interviews on adult educators' views on teaching, professional identity and professional growth. The material presented is a part of a study on professional identities, professional learning and personal educational theories of adult educators in Estonia with the aim to analyse what kind of support and which support systems educators actually need to foster their professional growth.

I have conducted interviews with 28 adult educators. Collection of material for research took place in two stages. First, professional biographical interviews were conducted. The interviewees told their stories about how they had become educators, i.e. described how they had become adult educators as well as their work and development.

The second stage consisted in a photo-interview (Hurworth 2003; Taylor 2002). For that, educators were asked to find pictures as a response to questions related to learning, teaching and educator's work (e.g. what is learning to your mind? Who is an adult learner in your opinion? Who is an adult educator? How have you developed and changed as an educator?) The pictures could be photos taken by the interviewees depicting their personal life, or selected from other sources, or drawings. The important thing was that the picture had to depict an image that to the interviewee's mind answered the above-described questions in some way/opened an important idea. After that, interviews were conducted to give the educators the opportunity to explain their opinions, understandings and views. This analysis is based on what the interviewees said, not on the interviewers' interpretations of the pictures. If the interviewer noticed some contradiction between the image in the picture and the spoken word, additional questions were posed to get more information and clarification.

The analysis of professional biographical interviews highlighted the same characteristic features described by Mishler (1999) in his studies: educators' professional trajectory is not uniform, there are several disjunctions, discontinuities, and transitions in it.

The analysis of educators' stories showed that the choices made by the interviewees were affected by changes occurring in Estonian society in the 90-ties as well as by the widening areas of activity related to the adult educator's profession. In the conditions of market economy, changing a profession or job became common (Titma

2002) which meant that people did not seem to consider it strange to quit a former job and become an educator instead. Collective activity was replaced with individual entrepreneurship (Titma 2002).

These changes affected also adult education – international cooperation in the field of adult education was started, the percentage of private training organisations increased and adults had more opportunities for continuing learning (Jõgi 2004).

Changes in the economic life and adult education in the 90s in Estonia caused or made it possible that the interviewees became educators.

The interviews show that the changed circumstances enabled them to abandon work in their chosen area of specialisation which was becoming less valued by society and choose another area of activity which was connected with education.

Thinking back at the time it actually seems a rather sad period where the Soviet money did not exist any more and the Estonian kroon came into use and musicians didn't have much perspective. (Marko)

The feeling of insecurity, including economic insecurity, caused by the changes in society created the belief that you have to seize every opportunity. Often people held several different positions at the time and also accepted offers to try their hand at the educator's job.

I think it was the period when (.) when I couldn't say "no" to anything. Perhaps, if somebody asked me now to come to a place like that and do something I do not master I would probably refuse without giving a second thought because why should I(Tiit)

Some started work as educators after losing their prior jobs because companies were closed down and organisation were reorganised. Opportunities to start work as an educator came from the new nationally established structures (National Defence League) and new popular areas of training (teamwork, sales).

In addition to that, several foreign training projects reached Estonia in the 90s; close contacts were created with adult educators in Denmark, Sweden and Finland and many educational projects reached us from USA. Some interviewees were involved in the projects and continued independent training careers after the foreign educators had left.

How the interviewees found their area of training

The interviewees' stories about their biography, lived life, patterns and descriptions of the events related to learning, work and self-improvement reflect various routes through which they reached their area of training.

1. The area of training is related to the speciality studied in University or to professional work.

This route seems quite natural and logical: these interviewees had acquired theoretical knowledge in the field (medicine, psychology, accounting, etc.) in University and gained professional experience through work and then started to share it by becoming educators.

However, the seeming smoothness of the route is misleading – there are interruptions on this route too: people change jobs, move to a new place, hold different positions although within the same area of specialisation; taking up the educator's work induces to quit the basic job, etc.

2. The area of training is related to practical work experience in a field not studied at school/University.

Those who took the second route acquired a specialisation but started work in a totally different field and the area of training (sale, secretary, service) is connected with their practical experience. They lack theoretical knowledge in the area and, instead, share practical experiential knowledge.

Basically you can say that a man came out of nowhere, although the man was a good salesman, even a very good salesman, and started to share his knowledge and experience. (Marko)

3. The area of training is related to in-service training, hobbies or community work.

In case of the third route, the area of training (floristry, adventure-training, project drafting, *feng shui*, management, teamwork) grows out of in-service training – it is not directly connected with a specialisation acquired earlier, but with hobbies.

4. The area of training pops out of nowhere – there is no visible connection between the area studied in University/school, prior work, or hobbies, yet it is in a way linked to all.

Looking at the mere biographical facts it is quite difficult to understand why this choice was made – the person already has a

job, and starting work as an educator improves neither the financial situation nor the position at work. Now that the educator's job is chosen, the person has to learn both the content of the training course and learn to educate other people. On the other hand, the prior learning, life and work experience have helped to create the context in which the person started to think about becoming an educator.

These schemes offer an insight into how knowledge of the relevant area of training develops. Professional knowledge is based on propositional (theoretical) knowledge, practical know-how and tacit knowledge (Eraut 1994). Important aspects of professional competence and expertise cannot be represented in propositional form and embedded in publicly accessible knowledge base (Eraut 1994). The professional knowledge of the educators who followed the first route is based on theoretical, practical and tacit knowledge. In case of the rest of the educators, the knowledge learned from practical experience and tacit knowledge is prevailing.

Working as an educator you can cultivate a certain lifestyle, which arises from a new attitude towards values – several meanings described reflect individualism - self-fulfilment, freedom, success, consumption, self-assurance, hedonism, etc. (Kalmus, Vihalemm 2004).

It's the freedom that I like best about the job. That I am actually (...) free. OK, I am not free all the time. Of course I have to read and prepare quite long course plans, but when I really get bored with everything, I can ... In autumn I went to Egypt 4 times, for example. I read a lot. It's fun. If I was a workman I couldn't have all this. (Marko)

The interviewees who can link the educator's job with their prior experience (studies, work, hobbies, etc.), who can connect it with their personality and see it as a link in a chain are better able to explain the essence of the job for themselves. There is no objectivity in it – it is a completely subjective process how they explain it and make it pleasant for themselves. In educator training and in-service training it is necessary to enhance the process and help people see the educator's job as part of the whole.

Learning patterns

It's important to construe learning as a complex process and avoid any separation between learning, personal development, socialisation, qualification and the like by regarding all such processes as types of learning when viewed from different angles or

positions (Illeris 2003).

Learning implies the integration of two very different processes, namely an external interaction process between the learner and his or her social, cultural or material environment, and an internal psychological process of acquisition and elaboration (Illeris 2003).

An important aspect of professional learning is defining self as a member of a community of practice. In a community of practice, in real work situation and work context skills, knowledge, norms, routines, stories, discourse is learned (Wenger 1998). Adult educators are not linked with any specific community or area or profession that brings along partial, fragmentary or impermanent identities (Malcolm, Zukas 2002).

In the 90ties in Estonia majority of adult educators were newcomers and they were shaping the community and learning in the community concurrently.

The career of an educator often starts with practical experience, which is followed by the studies to become a certified educator, as beginners they are learning mostly from personal experience. The important point of experiential learning is that the learners must reflect on their experiences in a critical way (Mezirow 2000; Kolb 1984).

The reflection process needs special conditions: time and space for reflection, the facilitators of reflection, the curricular or institutional environment, an emotionally supportive environment, broader theoretical viewpoint, and reflection skills (Moon 1999). In their daily work, adult educators rarely have time and conditions for conscious self-analysis; they also lack necessary experience and habits.

Adult educators' professional development can be understood as transformative learning. Transformative learning is a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open and better validated (Mezirow 2000). Central to Mezirow's conceptualization of transformative learning theory is also critical reflection. Teachers then transform frames of reference through critical reflection on their own and other's assumptions and beliefs about teaching.

Transformations often follow some variations of the following phases (McGonigal 2005, Mezirow 2000):

1. A disorienting dilemma, activating event – exposes the limitations of a learner's current knowledge and approach
2. Opportunities to identify and articulate underlying

assumptions, critical self-reflection

3. Critical discourse – recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
4. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
5. Planning a course of action
6. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
7. Opportunities to test and apply new perspectives

Recent studies on transformative learning have shown that the process of transformative learning may be long-term and progressive process which involves emotions, intuition, soul, spirituality and which is affected by sociocultural context and person's life-history (Dirkx 2001, Mezirow 2000, Taylor 2000).

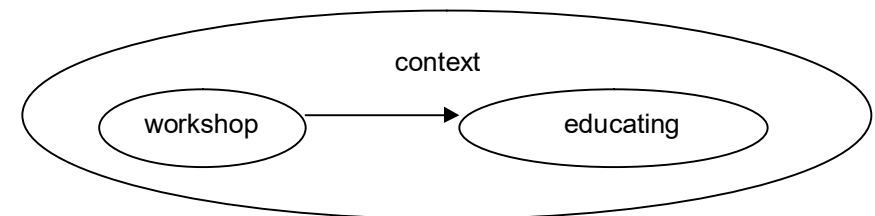
I. Sources of learning

The following sources of learning can be pointed out on the basis of the narratives:

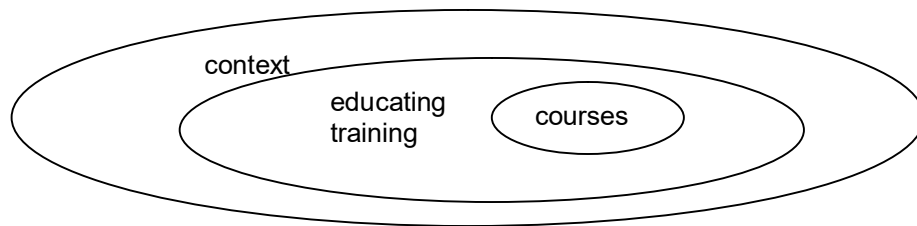
1. educator training: foreign projects, training provided by training institutions, studies related to adult training;
2. prior experience: life experience, work experience, experience gained as a learner (University, in-service training);
3. learning by doing: from learners, colleagues and peers; analysis of personal experience, reading;
4. general (cultural) context.

The following are basic patterns that characterise the educators:

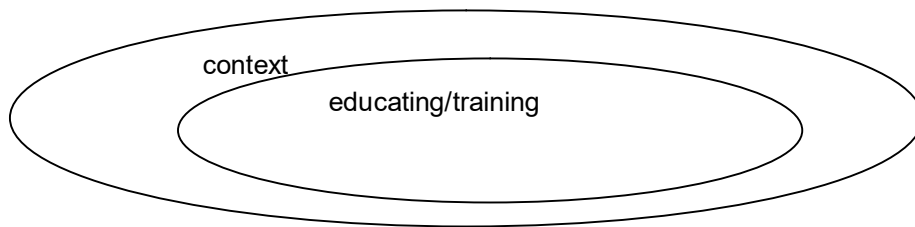
A: workshops – educating (working as adult educator)



B: educating (working as adult educator) – adult educators' courses



C: educating (working as adult educator)



1. Training

The interviewees acquired preparation for the educator's work in different ways.

a. Workshops

Some completed short time workshops or an induction period in an institution and thus acquired the content of the course and the basic truths of how to teach this content to other people. This kind of training is focused on teaching a specific course – the future educator learns the subject matter, and the structure and basic methodology for teaching this subject matter.

The above-described way of training is often characteristic of training courses conducted by foreign educators and learning within cooperation projects. The advantages of the kind of training are hands-on experience, opportunities for reflecting and discussing and getting feedback on the first steps taken. The future educators' feeling of security is increased by provision of a clear model; they can adhere to this model and their actions are clearly structured and defined.

The disadvantage of the kind of training is that no theoretical background either on the content of learning or the methodology of teaching was provided. This makes them a bit insecure when they

start teaching others.

However, these training courses are often described as transformative, courses that change the way of thinking or understanding things. This is probably due to several things – on the one hand the courses took place at the time when general paradigmatic changes in social life and educational beliefs occurred in Estonia and within the new circumstances these courses had a new, learner-centred, humanistic and experiential approach that was completely new to people who had acquired education in a Soviet school. Thus, the courses broke the old understanding of learning and teaching and changed the reference framework.

I would really call it a religious awakening that took place during this course. I had a learning-related awaking experience. (Taimi).

On the other hand, the courses were based on experiential learning and reflection and this provided the learners with the opportunity to analyse - and sometimes transform their beliefs and understandings.

b. Adult education studies

Usually people go to a specialized course for trainers after acquiring some experience as an educator. Practicing educators tend to feel that they need to learn more about the job. Since the interviewed educators started their work without special preparation, they felt insecure and doubted whether they did things right. Regarding these courses the interviewees emphasize the theoretical aspect, the opportunity to get a theoretical explanation to their practice (meta-theories), reasons for doing this one way or another.

In addition, such courses are a place where the community of educators gathers. Educators of different subjects can share their experience related to the problems of teaching and learning.

I had worked as an educator for 5 years already when I finally realized that one must learn more about it and how to do it. (Virve)

2. Learning from prior experience

For those who have not studied how to teach, the main source for developing an idea of the educator's practice is their personal life, work and learning experience.

Life experience is especially important to understand learners and manage interpersonal relationships. Life experience is the base on which an educator recognises, interprets and uses personal experience. He/she does not know what experience others have in this area – mediated experience. This can be both liberalizing and

restrictive at the same time.

And I began to realize that when people are unable to answer my questions, they probably do not understand. I realized it because I had experienced it myself. (Rita)

Work experience gives a feeling of security about the learning content – enables to give examples and create links. Sometimes even a period of life that seemed of little significance from the professional aspect at the time turned out to be important later on.

Lack of means/strategies of transferring an experience (work experience) to another situation (training, teaching). It seems to be difficult to transfer prior learning experience.

Generally learners do not know why the teacher or trainer does this or that. It is good if the learner remembers what he/she learned but probably he/she did not pay attention to the methodology or approach. The methodology and context need to be generated/added.

I knew how to do it but I had never taught it to anybody. Now I had to recall how I was taught. I tried to do the same but then I discovered that I didn't have the kind of equipment as my teacher had had. Then I had to start improvising and thinking how to get the best results (Tõnu)

An educator who conducts a course is first and foremost focused on teaching the subject matter, not on training educators – the educator's goal is not to draw attention to methodology and the underlying principles, perhaps he/she does not even have them. That means that it depends on the awareness of the learner what he/she manages to learn from other educators. There is no opportunity to reflect. A learning educator interprets his/her experience within the limits of his/her understandings, but the person who conducts the course may have quite different intentions.

3. Learning by doing - Learning from own experience while working as an educator

In some interviews educators declare that they learn from experience, learn from teaching, but it is quite difficult to understand what exactly they have learned – tacit knowledge.

Possibly, tacit knowledge is quite common and a problem may be the lack of the community with whom to discuss, interpret, create meaning, and formulate more specifically what has been learned.

Reflection is an important part of learning to become and be an educator. Reflection requires experience and skill and a theoretical context in which the experiences can be placed. It is important to

have the opportunity to share teaching experience with somebody. This person does not have to be more experienced and wiser; it is important just to have somebody. Educators feel the lack of professional reflective dialogue.

Understandings expressed in photo-interviews

Beliefs about life in general and beliefs about education do provide some basis for selecting instructional content, establishing teaching/learning objectives, selecting instructional materials and interacting with learners (Zinn 2004)

In the photo-interviews learning is seen by adult educators from a quite broad perspective. Learning is described as a process, a constant lifelong activity – you come back to the same issues and revise them on a new level (spiral).

The learning matter should be applicable. Learning is a purposeful activity but you do not often see the purpose while learning.

Learning is a change. Change in views; seeing things differently, changes in thinking that should be reflected in changed behaviour.

The changing process can be a transformative experience (Picture 1).

- Learning is like an earthquake or volcano eruption. It is not always pleasant; it may shatter or shift something. But new worlds have always emerged as the result of earthquakes. However, the earthquake or eruption cannot be totally destructive – I have drawn here green grass springing up. (Virve)
- *Learning is storing and arranging information - few people talk about learning as storing information but learning as arrangement of information is mentioned more often.*
- *Learning is understood as a cooperative process – social aspects of learning.*
- *Learning makes you independent (emancipatory learning?) – being able to walk on your own.*

Interviewees also stated the instances of incidental learning – while learning one can acquire some skill without planning to do so – elbowing, treading under foot.

- *Much of learning occurs without our noticing it – tacit knowledge.*
- *Learning is connected with emotions; often it is an effort, fear and temptation all together. Certainly, learning is connected with creativity.*



Picture nr 1. What is learning to your mind?

The understandings expressed by the educators reflect quite clearly their life patterns and learning experiences.

To conclude, the stories narrated by the adult educators show that the people who have chosen this profession and remained true to it describe themselves as independent people who can learn from their experience. They are experienced sudden changes and turns in their job-related activity, they have coped with these, learned in new situations, adapted well this far and they see being a trainer/educator as another challenge.

However, they do not know exactly how to identify themselves. They do not see a problem in that. They commit themselves to their educator's work in the way they see it and want to be the best. As the community with very clear boundaries has not been formed yet, they feel rather alone as practicing educators and do not know where to turn to ask help or share doubts and problems with. They discuss their activity more often with their friends and relatives than with other adult educators and this is the reason why critical reflection is not achieved.

Some factors supporting the formation and development of professional identity may be lacking or insufficient; therefore, adult educators may feel that learning and growth is difficult. Although the work of an adult educator is complicated, the studies to become one are often conducted unconsciously and lack systematic approach. If an educator does not think about self as an educator, i.e. does not identify self as an adult educator, it is possible that they do not pay enough attention to learning and teaching processes or personal learning and development as an educator.

Transformative learning process may be experienced as disorienting and confusing and adult educators need during these emotionally stressed periods stronger support to continue their learning and self-development processes. This means that educators need various support systems: communication within networks, clubs, organisation leaders' improved knowledge of how to support educators' growth, informing articles in the press, research, etc. Professional learning is an important challenge for an educator fostering professional growth and helping to achieve emotional balance and professional well-being.

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