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What motivates adults to learn?

This was one of the main topics of the Grundtvig Learning Partnership project MOKA (2011—2013). One of the results of this partnership is an overview of important factors in learning.

MOKA was a cooperation between:

In Poland — Deinde Ltd. www.deinde.pl

In Spain— ONECO www.oneco.org

In The Netherlands –Edos Foundation www.edosfoundation.com

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Reasons for adults to participate in education

Intellectual:

According to Dench and Regan (2000) the most important reasons for adults to follow education is a reason based on the intellect. Adults wanted to increase their knowledge, keep their brain active, they enjoy the challenge of learning new things and/or they want to learn something they had always been interested in. Knowles (1980) defined this as cognitive interest. To learn for the sake of learning, to seek knowledge for your own sake and to satisfy an inquiring mind.

Personal:

The second most important reasons to follow education according to Dench and Regan (2000) are on the personal level. They want to do something with their time, take their life into different directions and want to gain qualifications for personal satisfaction. It is not only about the intellectual brain it is also about social and emotional interests (Hyland, 2011). Knowles (1980) also defined personal advancement as a reason. People want to achieve higher status in a job, want to secure professional advancement and stay abreast of the competition. He also mentioned escape/stimulation as a personal factor. People want to relieve boredom, provide a break in the daily routine and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life. Also building new social relationships

can belong to this into this category (Knowles, 1980; McCrea, 1989). Increasing earnings is for most adults not a reason to study, the older learning is already on his maximum (Gegenfurtner and Vaurus, 2011)

Instrumental:

Dench and Regan (2000) think instrumental reasons are of less importance. Instrumental reasons can be having to do some learning for work, to help the family and to help with voluntary or community work. Knowles (1980) defines this as meeting up with external expectations and social welfare. Meeting up with external expectations is an important reason for adult learning according to Wang, Lewis and Greenwood (2012). They did their research about retraining in which the goal is to help the unemployed into work.

Important factors in learning:

Autonomy and self-directedness

Adults need a feeling of autonomy, self-concept and self-directedness (Fenwick, 2012; Knowles, 1980). An adult learner likes to be in control of the learning process (Fenwick, 2012). Adults will take responsibility for their own learning (Knowles, 1980).

Willingness

Adults have to be willing to learn and have to be interested in the topic (Votava & Husa, 2011; Dench & Regan, 2000). Their willingness increases if the course meets their field of interest (Kendall, Carey, Cramp & Perkins, 2012). Adults mostly have more intrinsic motivation than children (Gorges and Kandler, 2011).

Prior knowledge and life experience

Adults already have a lot of knowledge and experience in life. This knowledge and experience base should be taken into account when learning new things (Knowles, 1980; Votava & Husa, 2011).

Self confidence

It is for adult learners very important that they are confident that they are able to learn the new things. They need to believe that they can succeed. (Sanders, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).

Learning goals

Adult learners want to know what to learn and why they have to learn something. It is important for them that the learning goals are clear (Sanders, 2005). Adults are goal-oriented, they know which goals they want to attain before starting (Knowles, 1980).

Practical and relevant

Adults find it important that the learning is relevant, problem oriented and practical (Kendall, Carey, Cramp & Perkins, 2012; Gorges and Kandler, 2011). According to Knowles (1980) adults are relevancy oriented, they have to see a reason for learning and the applicability in work or other responsibilities they want to learn for and adults are practical, they focus on the aspects of the lessons that will help them most.

Respect

All learners need to be respected but for adults it is even more important. They need to be treated as adults (Gorges and Kandler, 2011; Fenwick, 2012) and should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge. They need to be allowed to voice their opinions freely (Knowles, 1980).

Role of the teacher

Teachers have to facilitate learning and they must actively involve adult learners in the learning process. Teachers also have to identify the objectives at the beginning of the course and need to show the adults how the class will help them reach their goals and how it will be useful for them on the job (Knowles, 1980). Teachers should listen better to the adults in what they need and wish in adult education (Wang, Lewis, Greenwood, 2012).