The Impacts of Lifelong and Distance Education on Adult Learners' Lives and Reclaiming Lifelong Learning as a Human Development Process

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Abstract

This article makes a focus on the importance of Adult, Lifelong & Distance Learning. Nowadays, in modern information and communication conditions, it is impossible to imagine education without distance and lifelong learning. The article explores the potentials of distance learning in the lives of adult learners. Distance education, for adult learners, is a scenario that not only strengthens the personal, social and professional development of individuals, but also the development of competencies applied not only to the digital world but also to each person's daily activities. The consequence of lifelong learning is fixed in our societies through documents and speeches published by national and supranational organizations worldwide such as the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the World Bank and the European Union (EU). Thus, educational reforms, particularly in the European Union' countries, since the 1990s have been guided by the recommendations of these international organizations that, through an abundant production of documents and the development of statistical projects, emphasize the centrality of education and its ability to guarantee employability, avoiding social exclusion, promoting citizenship and personal development. The desired scenarios for the evolution of societies in the official discourses and documents emphasize the importance of learning and access to skills, competencies, and knowledge, as determinants of an adaptation of societies to the globalization of economies and technological and social changes (UNESCO, 2016). At the heart of this vision is the idea of Lifelong Learning.

Keywords: Adult Education, Distance Learning, Lifelong Learning, Online Education, Human Development, National and Supranational Organizations, Vision of Education

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Introduction

The continuous nature of education and learning, which derives from the universal principle of education, is united in the concept of "lifelong learning". According to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UNESCO UIL), one of the most important international actors in the field, lifelong learning is essentially "based on the combination of learning and living, involving people of all age groups in all life situations (family, school, community, workplace, etc.) educational activities carried out in different ways (formal, informal and informal) aimed at meeting a wide range of educational needs and requirements"(UNESCO, 2014).

Thus, we can outline the relationship between the concepts of Lifelong and Adult Learning, that is supported by the vision that "in the world of lifelong learning" includes all forms of education and learning that aim to "ensure the participation of all adults in the life of a given society and in the world of work". (UNESCO, 2015) Thus, adult learners are the main actors of lifelong learning. In general, an adult learner is considered to be a person who "systematically attends any format of adult education, is representative of the chronological period following adolescence, and voluntarily participates in learning and teaching processes." Adulthood is characterized by different forms of maturity, from biological to emotional and psychosocial, vocational, cultural and political" (Mavrak, 2018). This means that adult learners are an extremely heterogeneous group, defined not so much by age criteria as by learning needs and motivations. Therefore, the official "age threshold" for obtaining adult status varies quite a bit in a number of countries and is not necessarily related to the legal age of majority.

Lifelong learning is "The self-directed, continuous quest to seek formal or informal education for personal enjoyment or to develop career skills. Lifelong learning is imperative to the maximization of human potential across the lifespan and remains at the forefront of these challenges. Learning can take place in *formal, non-formal and informal settings*.

Formal education is provided in an institutionalized, deliberate and planned manner through public organizations and recognized private institutions, which in their entirety, constitute the formal education system of a country. Formal education is usually associated with a continuous path from initial education to an individual's first entry into the labor market. However, it may also include vocational education, education for people with special needs and other types of adult education. In any case, formal education programs must have at least one semester of study.

Non-formal education is also institutionalized, deliberate and planned by the institution providing education, as is the case with formal education. However, the important feature of non-formal education is that it "appears as an addition, alternative and/or complement to formal education in the process of lifelong learning". Non-formal education programs may provide qualifications but are not recognized by government education authorities as equivalent to formal qualifications.

Informal learning includes all forms of learning that are intentional or incidental, but not institutionalized (UNESCO UIL, 2012). In contrast, formal and informal education, informal learning is much less structured and organized. It can take place in the context of everyday life: in the family, at work, in the local community, through volunteering, in the digital space, in museums or libraries.

Distance Education

Distance education is based on the learner's independence theory, with the minimum needed face-to-face teacher-student interaction, and the maximum level of personal learning materials. Distance learning is not a new concept; it has expanded all over the world since the 1980s. Industrialized and developing countries as well have adopted distance learning (Rumble & Harry, 1982). In Europe and other Western countries, a worldwide interest was arising.

Honeyman and Miller (1993) defined Distance education as: " a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom"[1]. (Honeyman and Miller, 1993, p. 67). According to Rikala et al traditional teaching and learning approaches are insufficient to fulfil the expectations of today's learners. Distance learning, e-learning, online learning, virtual or mobile learning opportunities have been widely discussed as an alternative to traditional teaching and learning in the recent decades. Rikala (2015) analyses the interrelationship and differences between eLearning, distance learning and mobile learning. The author emphasizes differences in time and space and views technology as a tool to bridge the differences and gaps using the pace of study and methods convenient for students.

Another definition of distance education is "the process of acquiring knowledge and skills through a variety of media for the transfer of education and information, including all types of technology and various forms of education level for distance learning" (The American Association for Distance Learning [USDLA], 2004). ELearning is a type of learning or teaching platform that depends on electronic devices and technology instead of papers and classroom teaching (Wheeler, 2012). There are two main types of e-Learning: time-independent asynchronous type, where students study from downloadable courseware at their convenient time, and the synchronous type, where real-time online learning with the ability to interact and chat with students in live conferences is scheduled at set times (Merzouk et al., 2014). There are many distance learning choices; like video conferences, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, open-schedule, fixed-time, computer-based, and hybrid learning.

Characteristics of Distance Education

Distance education has various characteristics that make this model of learning so attractive for students around the world, but the following characteristics are most important:

1. **Flexibility -** One of the main reasons why people choose online learning is the ability to balance their private and school commitments. In most cases, students who opt for online education have commitments that cannot be postponed.

This is why they need the freedom of being able to plan when they will attend lectures and complete assignments. In addition, e-learning allows a learning rhythm that does not depend on other students, so one can speed up or slow down depending on their abilities and commitments.

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[1] Honeyman, M., Miller, G. (1993). Agriculture distance education: A valid alternative for higher education? Proceedings of the National Agricultural Education Research Meeting, pp. 67-73.

2. **All learning materials are in one place -** In online learning, learning materials are available to students at all times. Educational institutions are obligated to provide each student with the learning material necessary for passing exams and successfully completing the course.

Learning material usually refers to recordings of online lectures, online books, tests, etc. Literature is mostly stored on the school server or sent to students' email so they could use it when it suits them. This saves time and facilitates independent learning.

3. **Possibility of delayed viewing/replay** – People choose distance learning because they want to have the freedom to study when their obligations allow. This is possible thanks to the main characteristic of online education, i.e. possibility of delayed viewing. All lectures are recorded and uploaded to the server, after which they are available to students 24/7. The recorded material can be paused, rewatched, which makes it easier to follow lessons and maintain the desired learning pace.

4. **Cost effective** – online education is, as a rule, significantly cheaper than traditional education. Tuition fees are lower primarily because students are not physically present at lectures. In addition, there are no accompanying costs of transportation, books and food. Online education only requires a stable Internet connection and a laptop (or even a mobile phone).

5. **Quality** – distance education provides high-quality education that not only enables the acquisition of new knowledge, but also internationally recognized diplomas and certificates. A large number of schools that organize online courses have years of experience in this field, and can guarantee top quality teachers and latest study programs. This is why diplomas and certificates acquired in online programs are highly valued around the world, both by other educational institutions and employers.

Conclusion

The rapid advances in technology, globalization and longevity should be met with an adaptable and flexible community. Lifelong learning will be instrumental in preparing for these changes and in cultivating a future-ready society that positively shifts the future of education, health and well-being. Interdisciplinary research integrating knowledge from learning sciences with psychology, social sciences, and cognitive neuroscience should be considered in tandem to inform lifelong learning policies and practices. Importantly, open source data platforms that promote knowledge-sharing, accessibility and inclusivity among educators, businesses, policy-makers, individuals and their communities are fundamental for the future of the science of lifelong learning. Thanks to its many positive characteristics, distance education as an instrument of lifelong learning has never been so accessible as it is now. Various obstacles, such as lack of time have been solved in this form of education, as shown by the data, because more and more students around the world opt for e-learning. Simply put, studying from home enables one to obtain high-quality education, while retaining the flexibility of their private life. Everyone is entitled to a good education and a chance for a successful career, and this is exactly what distance education can provide.

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