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**THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTONOMOUS SELF-
-DEVELOPMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN THE
THEORY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING
BY J. MEZIROW**

Reality is variable and the process of change can only be made faster or slower. The modern world is growing at a very fast pace, which opens more and more new opportunities but also poses serious new threats. Civilization, on the one hand, improves living conditions, but on the

other, it can change them in a way that reduces its own achievements. The development of both gives us freedom, however, it retracts from our sense of security. The dynamics of changes in the human environment are conducive to having to learn throughout your life (Stochmiątek, 2005, p. 18).

In andragogy, teaching adults, usually understood as educating holders of a document certifying their legal age, is the main focus. It is the main task of the andragogists themselves, but also of psychologists interested in the processes of acquiring knowledge and to sociologists of education (Aleksander, 2009). Teaching adults is also becoming a subject of interest to politicians and economists who are seeing guidance in the regularities of teaching adults concerning the rising opportunities to increase efficiency and productivity of learners, the educated and reeducated, on top of self-learners such as employees of enterprises and public offices. Therefore, adult education should help in understanding the problems of modern civilization, modern life and the needs of modern people and their world. Currently, the key skill of an adult human being is the ability to find their place in the new reality of information chaos and the continuous changes that occur in it (Malewski, 2010). In order to exist in civilization, one should present the attitude of adaptation to reality throughout one's life, characterized by the ability to modify the internal patterns and be ready for growth. Adult learning today is necessary also taking into account the demographic decline, observed mainly in European countries. For this reason, adults, especially women, will have to work longer professionally and systematically master new technologies and working methods. These include rational demographic

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and economic analyzes the value of which will not be used by certain populist political groups. Technological progress causes the need for continuous learning of adults, so that they could handle the modern technical equipment and expand the general knowledge and expertise. Accordingly, there is a growing need for wide-profile training which will allow learners to adapt to rapidly changing conditions.

The advantage of adult learning is that learners are usually self-reliant, disciplined, more balanced and capable of self-organization of the educational process (Gogia, 2013). However, they require more individual teaching methods than in systematic education (Jankowski, Przyszczykowski & Skrzypczak, 1996). In addition, the teacher of adult learners should be thoroughly prepared in terms of content (Denek, 2013). Older people tend to process information slower than young ones for better expert (professional) knowledge building but are just as good in less complex activities.

Adult learners who are extramural students, following the challenges of the labor market and searching for planes of personal development undertake further studies at different stages of their lives (Galimberti, 2014). This results in that in one group of students we will find persons in different age groups. Persons who are under the age of 40 are presently in their early adulthood. This period is characterized by the ability to absorb and apply knowledge at the highest level. Relativism in thinking is shaped then, along with the ability to understand and reconcile contradictions, which facilitates understanding of other people. Creative thinking abilities are used, as is systematic problem solving and the ability to adapt quickly. Students in their middle age – according to different classifications we would be talking about 40 to 50, or even 60-year-olds, are, at the present time, still a large group of learners. These individuals are characterized by a stable level of their intellectual capacity (Matlakiewicz & Solarczyk-Szwec, 2009). They are characterized by broad knowledge and accumulated life experience, which make up for wisdom, seen as the ability to issue accurate judgments on topics related to important life problems. Only the rate of information processing decreases with age, which may be due to the reference of the problems solved to the wealth of accumulated knowledge. In Poland, we distinguish between three generations of workers. These are the baby boomers, aged 45–60, who are “working to survive” and workers aged 30–45, called the Generation X, whose motto is “I live in order to work.” The youngest generation of workers are people aged 20–30 years old. We sometimes call them Generation Y. Their motto is “I work to live.” The attitudes towards work are derived from the experiences of their lives and education. Generation “Z” are the young people born after 1990 (some experts define the limit at 1995). This generation is only entering or will enter the labor market, so experts are very cautious in their characterization. “Zs” are the generation raised in times of prosperity. They grew up in the world of modern technology so that they have a very high ability to function in the virtual world. They are well aware of novelties and easily learn to use the latest gadgets. Real life and interpersonal relations are replaced by contact in the virtual world. Generation Z lives in the virtual world. What matters to them is what is on-line. They live in a virtual community,

formed by hundreds of people with similar passions and interests. Their basic characteristic and the biggest advantage is fluency in the virtual. There are no impossible tasks for them on the Web. They always know where to look for information or who to ask. They seek knowledge instantly, having been brought up in an information-driven world, and orient themselves in several events at the same time easily. M. Spitzer (2013) calls this attitude “multi-tasking,” criticizing it for the superficiality of engagement. However, the young people can simultaneously track several Internet auctions, chat with their friends and watch a movie. They instantly master new applications and confidently communicate in foreign languages. Openness to the world means that they are often fascinated by something that many people of the older generation see as a threat. They are not afraid to travel and meet new people. The generation of “baby boomers” and the generation X are different from their younger colleagues. For them, everything must be organized and based on solid principles. So too they learn. They do not shun thorough reading of texts and they can independently reach conclusions. However, it takes them much more time than their young colleagues, who, instead of studying the issue, look for answers on the Internet. This creates conflicts and a lack of understanding among students. It also poses a considerable challenge for the academic teachers (Yahr & Shimmel, 2013). Adults are more motivated to learn if they see the usefulness of acquired knowledge and skills in dealing with the requirements of life and work.

Part-time university students actively participate in lifelong learning, which is their conscious choice, leading to the realization of an objective. Adult education is assistance in their development, a source of support in the construction of their biographies, and most importantly, it helps adults to build their identities. Identity is a structure that is subject to change. It is a mental construct in happening, that changes its content and construction, something that can be imposed during a lifetime, achieved and even independently constructed. Belief in the possibility of constructing one’s identity attracts the attention of andragogists and adult educators. Identity is reflexive consciousness of the individual. As Giddens wrote (Giddens, 2001), identity is what the individual is aware while expressing their self-awareness. Dynamic changes occurring in everyday life are not conducive to routine and dormant reflection on oneself. When compliance with established conventions is not enough to maintain the continuity of everyday life, when the predictability of the conditions of everyday life and the art of associating with people becomes questionable, then one must make attempts to act and think in a new way in relation to previously established patterns (Giddens, 2001, p. 58). Then, one reflects upon one’s biography and on the establishment of their identity. One asks questions that lead to the realization of what values are important in development and in life.

In the life of every human being, values which refer to ones’ beliefs play an important role in creating one’s internal image of reality and resolving internal conflicts and self-discovery. Values create behaviors and aspirations for a specific purpose in life and are a kind of motivation for action, so they can shape goals and objectives as

long as they are well formed and we are confident of having these values. In psychology, values are determined as what the object of one's desire is. Values become the criterion for selection of motives, and what is more, they are also a factor that affects not only the choice of the goals of actions, but also the choice of means necessary for their implementation. The value in such understanding is associated with the emotional sensation of properties of an object. Values are associated with rational choices to act, which does not go beyond the boundaries of morality (Matuszewicz, 1975, p. 10–11).

Anything that grabs will, attracts feelings, raises desire and resolutions, which sets out objectives for action can be called value. It may be an objective, a content, all matters big or small, wise and less wise, good, noble and sublime, or mundane and selfish. For a human being, everything can become the apple of their aspirations and desires, and that what becomes a goal, a desire, begins to shape the individual, their hands and face, their heart and the whole personality. Values then become the justification of conduct and life, as well as education (Homplewicz, 1999).

Values of life define life goals. They determine the shape of the changes one wishes to make in life. An adult who is actively and subjectively striving for their development is transforming their life with assumed effects in mind. Using cognitive processes, unspecified needs are formulated as objectives. Needs are motivational states of activating the cognitive functioning of the body. The result of the cognitive “manipulation” is the objective, which is an instance of cognitive needs. The human person is capable of creating purely cognitive standards that govern its behavior. They constitute the content of subjective attitudes, which is a manifestation of learner autonomy. Therefore, it is important to again draw attention to the axiology in the process of academic training (Półturzycki, 2014). Values are a source of learning objectives or any purposeful action. Underlying values are the support and realization of aspirations in adult life.

Objectives are structures that relate to the future, to what is about to occur after the instantiated action. The ability to construct objectives requires us to imagine something that is not true in real time, but which can occur only after some time. Constructing goals is the domain of typical human consciousness requiring their placement on the temporal continuum, which implies having a time perspective. Timing covers the past, present and future. Getting to know yourself and your optimal rhythm and emotions associated with it is a prerequisite for finding the optimal implementation strategy and avoiding negative side effects. Objectives are regulators of human life, which is why it is very important the correct and properly identify them. And though it should be subject to individual human choice to construct them, their formation often depends on many factors that are currently present in one's life. Z. Zalewski identified two main sources of formation purposes. The first one concerns the very individual and “[...] the objectives derived from their needs and achieving goals implies their satisfaction” (Zalewski, 1991). The second source

is based on external factors regulated in the society, accepted by group standards, as well as through observation and imitation, that is, forms of learning. One can have telic tendencies (young people plan their lives, treating plans and objectives very seriously) as opposed to those oriented paratelicly (young people are more involved in everyday life, not thinking about the future). Internal factors of choosing goals in life can be satisfying one's needs.

Development of goals is anticipatory action, remote in time. In addition to the impact of the formation of goals, one should pay attention to the value of the objective as such.

The anticipated states must provide a specific value for the individual to ever have the will to pursue them. A subjective value can have a source in the fact that the objectives meet needs, that they contribute to the development of culture and that they will help preserve the dignity and higher spiritual values of the person. The individual must be capable of hierarchizing values and to organize the world according to relatively stable criteria (Zalewski, 1991, p. 62).

Z. Zalewski also claims that the goals must not only have a certain value, but they also need to have a predisposition for being implemented. This is not always dependent on the will and imagination of the human being. External conditions also play a significant impact on their achievement. Action aimed at achieving objectives are taken knowing the value and opportunities to achieve what you want. This is proof of the ability to make decisions independently, according to one's beliefs: autonomously (Ciechanowska, 2011).

Autonomy (Greek: *autos* – alone, and *nomos* – right) is self-government, freedom, opportunity to make free choices. The psychology of autonomy is most often understood as maintaining the integrity of the self. You can also say that autonomy means self-management of one's agenda (Harnett, 2012). Also the so-called moral autonomy is frequently evoked, which implies the acts of a person ruled by their will based on recognized rational moral principles. Autonomy as a concept in Pedagogy first appeared in the views of P. Freire (Kostyło, 2011). Freire, who worked in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, was opposed to traditional education and power structures limiting the freedom of people. He created a pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire's views represent the beginning of emancipatory pedagogy. Emancipation, according to the author, is a struggle for self-determination, equality, co-determination, democracy, self-government, wisdom and rationalism. It is liberation from despotism, coercion and violence, irrationality and social stupidity.

Jack Mezirow says of autonomy:

Autonomy refers to the understanding, skills, and disposition necessary to become critically reflective of one's own assumptions and to engage effectively in discourse to validate one's beliefs through the experiences of others who share universal values (Mezirow, 1997).

Autonomy in the theory of transformative learning is an expression of responsible thinking, which is regarded as the central issue of adult learning. With a concept developed by J. Mezirow it results that in the case of adults, it is crucial to an individual's ability to learn transformatively – learning to define the world and their place in it with a willingness to task the trouble deep, exhausting, sometimes painful reflection and transformation of their frame of reference or resist attempts to impose meanings, which they do not really want (Pleskot-Makulska, 2007). It is difficult, on the one hand, because it requires overcoming their resistance associated with the need to abandon the convenience of accepting the meanings set by others. On the other hand, it is associated with the ability to accept the state of discomfort and negative deep emotions resulting from experiencing the disintegration of a so far efficient system of interpretation.

We transform our frames of reference through **critical reflection on the assumptions** upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based. We can become critically reflective of the assumptions we or others make when we learn to solve problems instrumentally or when we are involved in communicative learning. We may be critically reflective of assumptions when reading a book, hearing a point of view, engaging in task-oriented problem solving (objective reframing), or self-reflectively assessing our own ideas and beliefs (subjective reframing). Self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformations (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7).

This requires mental toughness and determination in dealing with the elaboration of possible ways of understanding what is going on and determine a course of action – with no guarantee that this attempt will be successful. Meanings created by the mind are strongly associated with self-image. They are also deeply rooted in the culture, in which the person lives. Challenging the frame of reference and undermining any of these two elements gives birth to anxiety and triggers defensive mechanisms. Overcoming this difficulty allows one not only to gain new knowledge and change the behavior of an individual, but it is an epistemic change. It means the transformation of ways in which one comes to obtaining new knowledge and its legitimacy, as well as attitudes towards themselves and the world. J. Mezirow draws attention to the diversity of educational work with adult learners (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). The mere fact of readiness to achieve autonomy of thinking and learning requires a somewhat adequate maturity of the learner. However, ways of influencing such a learner by the teacher must be adapted appropriately.

To facilitate transformative learning, educators must help learners become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions. Learners need practice learning, educators must help learners become in recognizing frames of reference and using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective. Finally, learners need to be assisted to participate effectively in discourse. Discourse is necessary to validate what and how one understands, or to arrive at a best judgment regarding a belief. In this sense, learning is a social process, and discourse becomes central to making meaning (Mezirow, 1997).

The importance of the concept, whose author is J. Mezirow, not related to the fact that it is surrounded with a huge number of contexts, theories and knowledge from many disciplines. The most important value of the concept of transformative learning is that it reveals certain mechanisms limiting human development and barriers inherent in social life and in the individual. These barriers are potentially existing threats involving the possibility of restraining the individual by imposing other system of meanings that define the world in which he or she lives. These barriers affect their thinking and action concerning the danger. They can lead to mindless acceptance of events, which she or he experienced. Transformative learning is such learning where you are allowed to break free from this type of operation. In this approach, the autonomous attitude of the learner is expressed regarding their own development, transformation and learning.

Autonomous learners are ones that take a proactive stance and try to make the best use of their own capacities and capabilities. Autonomous adult learners go beyond responding to commands given by the teacher. In this way, the task of a teacher working with a group of well-developed autonomous learners becomes easier. The satisfaction with the results achieved also comes easier.

Autonomy is based on the conviction that all learning is individual. As such, the whole idea of developing autonomy may be difficult to reconcile with the use of a textbook in the foreign language classroom. Almost all textbooks are collections of texts and tasks structured by the author in a way he considers best for teaching and learning a foreign language and in addition, most textbooks define the progression of such learning. The illusion that all learners not only use the same learning strategies and encounter similar problems simultaneously, but that there is a certain progression common to all learners, is one that is sometimes shared by foreign language textbooks and teachers alike. If, however, our aim is to promote individual learning and diversification, any attempt to organize the learning process for **all** learners in **one** particular way, may be regarded as an obstacle (Fenner, 2000).

From the point of view of teaching, learner autonomy is a useful feature because it increases its effectiveness.

The consequence of the autonomy of the learner is responsibility. It is therefore important to develop autonomy of the adult learner from the earliest stages of education, wherever possible. A responsible and conscious attitude towards their own education gives learners a high efficiency of education. A reflective approach is one of the most effective ways to teach activity and responsibility. It consists in the fact that learners analyze their own teaching strategies starting to make decisions about whether they should be corrected or not and how. Then the responsibility gradually goes from teacher to learner who takes control of their learning which leads to their independence. Acquisition of autonomous elements is a complex process. This is done through two parallel processes: a gradual removal of coded education behaviors and skills as well as acquiring new behaviors. Thus, the learner needs to “grow up” into autonomy. This is not an automatic process, which is acquired with age.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTONOMOUS SELF-DEVELOPMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN THE THEORY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING BY J. MEZIOROW

Keywords: adult education, transformative learning, autonomy learning, self-development

Abstract: Adult education is the central question of andragogy. Its mission is to assist in understanding the problems of the growing number of adult learners in the perspective of lifelong learning. Currently, the key skill of an adult human is the ability to find a new reality and updating their competence. Studying of extramural students is an active participation in the lifelong learning, which is their conscious choice, leading to the realization of the objective. According to the Mezirow theory, ability to reject frames of reference and self-assigned meaning it is a feature transformative adult learning. Autonomy in theory transformative learning is an expression of responsible thinking, which is regarded as the central issue of adult learning.

ZNACZENIE AUTONOMICZNEGO SAMOROZWOJU UCZĄCYCH SIĘ DOROSŁYCH W PERSPEKTYWIE TEORII TRANSFORMATYWNEGO UCZENIA SIĘ J. MEZIOROWA

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja dorosłych, transformatywne uczenie się, autonomia uczenia się, samorozwój

Streszczenie: Edukacja dorosłych stanowi centralne zagadnienie andragogiki. Jej zadaniem jest pomoc w zrozumieniu problemów rosnącej grupy dorosłych uczących się w perspektywie całościowego uczenia się. Obecnie kluczową umiejętnością dorosłego człowieka jest zdolność do odnalezienia się w nowej rzeczywistości oraz aktualizowanie swych kompetencji. Studiowanie studentów zaocznych jest aktywnym uczestnictwem w całościowym uczeniu się, które stanowi ich świadomy wybór, prowadzący do realizacji założonego celu. Zgodnie z teorią Mezirowa umiejętność odrzucenia ram odniesienia i samodzielnego nadawania znaczeń jest cechą transformatywnego uczenia się dorosłych. Autonomia w teorii transformatywnego uczenia się stanowi wyraz odpowiedzialnego myślenia, które traktowane jest jako centralne zagadnienie uczenia się dorosłych.