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## **Adult Educators' Approaches to the Educational Process and the Expected Results Introspection Reconstructed in the Phenomenographic Research**

### **Abstract**

The paper's topic refers to phenomenographic research with the participation of adult educators. The paper reflects educators' concepts regarding expected learning outcomes or the learning process. These individual concepts were identified based on reconstructions of adult educators' experiences. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the variety of approaches which educators apply in the educational process and the learning outcomes that adult learners are expected to achieve – according to the educators' assumptions. Reference to selected theoretical models included in the paper allows looking at the theoretical context.

**Keywords:** *educators' approaches, adult education, phenomenography, learning outcomes*

### **Introduction**

Selected outcomes of the phenomenographic research are presented in the paper concerning the introspection of adult educators approaches to learning and expected learning outcomes. The selected approaches presented in this paper may bring perspective of various aspects of support offered to adult learners. These assumptions were identified during interviews with 20 adult educators in various locations in Poland. The authors present selected assumptions representing educators' learning approaches and expected outcomes.

The research addressed the ways of experiencing multidimensional support in adult learning as well as understanding, perceiving, and conceptualising various approaches concerning the learning process of adults. The analysis of the research data drew the researcher's attention to assumptions made by educators. These assumptions reflect their tendency to support internal beliefs that the way they educate may or must lead to expected results or may influence the learning process. The researcher identified educators' approaches in their reconstructions of experiencing competencies or understanding the phenomenon. They are presented in one or more sentences preceding quotations.

Two authors share their reflections on the research, its findings and its context, one being directly involved and the other in the role of an external researcher who shares his comments.

## **Research Methodology**

Phenomenography is the approach that identifies how people perceive, experience, understand and conceptualise the phenomenon (Marton, 1981, pp. 177–200). There may be similarities and differences in how people describe their ways of experiencing the phenomenon. Moreover, the researcher may seek hidden meanings behind these concepts (Viladrich, 2005).

Although in a phenomenographic interview data is gathered at an individual level, the researcher focuses on collective awareness and variation in how a phenomenon is experienced. Gathering data at the individual level is the starting point for exploring how the phenomenon may be experienced. Once the phenomenon has been selected, the following phases of the phenomenographic research are planned: data collection, immersion in data, developing categories and finalising the outcome space.

The purpose of the analysis in phenomenographic research is to discover differences in how a phenomenon is experienced (Svensson, 1997, pp. 159–171; Bruce, 2000, pp. 91–109; Limberg, 2005, pp. 280–283). The researcher works on articulating the interlocutor's thoughts about the experience as fully as possible (Marton & Booth, 1997). The analysis aims to uncover the variation concerning how the phenomenon is experienced (Svensson, 1997, pp. 159–171; Bruce, 2000, pp. 91–109; Limberg, 2005, pp. 280–283). Data analysis involves reading, analysing, and categorising collected data to identify a set of qualitatively distinct and logically related ways of experiencing the studied phenomenon. It is an iterative process until a stable set of distinct categories is obtained. Data analysis involves

analysing data to identify recurring patterns and themes that may indicate important information (Daniel et al., 2016).

Many researchers study how phenomenography, as a qualitative research method, can tackle key challenges in science education (e.g., Han & Ellis 2019). Phenomenography is a well-established qualitative research method and has been widely adopted for research education in multiple disciplines. In the last years, the method has been especially appealing to science educators (Chiu et al., 2016; Howitt & Wilson, 2018).

Various approaches to education, educator's roles, and a variety of expected learning outcomes – which follow these approaches – evolve from the research findings in which educators were asked about competencies they apply while educating adults. The presented research aimed to explore how adult educators understand their experience. A technique of semi-structured interview was applied in the research. The researcher interpreted the reality given the explored phenomenon based on adult educators' statements expressed during the reconstruction of their experiences.

Purposeful sampling was applied in the research to ensure the greatest possible diversity of participating educators. The following parameters in profiling educators were taken into consideration: gender (10F and 10M); age (28–69 y.o.a.); area of professional practice or expertise (profession/occupation); type of education (formal, non-formal); geographical type of area (rural, urban, region of residence); level of education (vocational, secondary, tertiary).

## **Research Results: Educators' Approaches to Education and Expected Learning Outcomes**

Educators represent diverse attitudes and approaches to what they hope may help with respect to the desired learning outcomes. Some approaches are related to methods; others reflect the contextual factors or individual perspectives that the educator may consider important or valuable. The assumptions are presented below.

The approach that concentrates on exercise is expected to lead towards proficiency in sports activities.

“Repetition of exercises. It is connected with mastery and the quality of performance”.

Understanding the learners may facilitate their involvement, active participation, and commitment.

“It is probably important that I do not pretend I know everything and that I have the power over the learners. I used to say: OK! We have this kind of problem. Let us try to think how we may solve it – and this leads to deeper communication”.

Caring for relatedness may lead to increased involvement and participation.

“... so that a certain level of relatedness is achieved in a group of learners that encourages everyone to express their opinions”.

According to the educator involved in artistic education, a conducive learning environment is a condition for developing individual creative power.

“Conducive learning environment, nice climate facilitating creativity – to free people’s talents, to stimulate their creativity”.

Individualisation in education is one of the assumptions made by educators in hope this may help learners to understand the content or tasks better by reflecting one’s own perspective.

“One needs to learn how to talk to people. How to look at an individual – the one that has some experience behind or some problems to deal with”.

In the case of training pharmacists, it is necessary to emphasise the procedures that must be strictly applied.

“That’s why procedures are created for – in my opinion. They are not to be broken. If procedures have been developed and they work – one should stick to them”.

One of the assumptions was to indicate mistakes to ensure correctness in learning foreign languages.

“I am a correcting teacher. Correctness is something I would promote in any case”.

Developing an apprentice-master relationship helps the learners benefit from direct collaboration with an experienced master who is also an educator.

“All my classes are based on the apprentice-master relationship. I do not call myself a master, but this is what I mean – it is their chance to contact a practitioner directly”.

A learner-centred approach and setting the stage that helps to develop – according to the educator’s reconstruction – the learner’s feeling of competence, and it helps to enhance the learner’s autonomy.

“It is the learner whom I place in the centre, not myself. Cause I know that instruction does not bring great results and what matters is the experience when a person achieves something by her or his own efforts”.

Cognitive diversity – when appreciated by an educator – leads to the application of various education methods.

“Besides what I am up to is three types of experience: auditive, visual and creative”.

Understanding, openness and sharing experience may facilitate life-changing or transformative learning. According to a counsellor, making people aware of various possible strategies in work and personal life leads to reframing how people perceive themselves and their own chances.

“I have certain knowledge and experience which I share with participants. This helps them to see other options”.

The patience of an educator may be the factor that helps to achieve better learning outcomes.

“I am patient to some extent and that's what the learners appreciate. I do not get discouraged when I see someone's mistakes, I carry on until the learner gets things done”.

Supporting the learner's autonomy may assist in mastering new skills or applying cognitive resources.

“I support him in the way that helps to solve the problem. He must deal with the problem by himself anyway. I give additional instructions if necessary”.

Interdisciplinarity at the university broadens perspectives by considering various options in applying knowledge representing various disciplines in a certain context.

“Interdisciplinary knowledge is a must for an educator. It is about the ability to make connections between the items they learn with the knowledge they gain in other subjects”.

Learning by doing – this expression reflects the educator's approach that allows dealing with the task. It leads to the competence of the learners.

“We must prepare people to deal with unusual situations for which ordinary solutions do not work. During practical classes we go into the water and use the equipment in practice”.

The educator pays attention to the correct and accurate performance of the candidate for the position of locomotive engine driver. He indicates mistakes whenever necessary because the rule of zero tolerance for mistakes applies.

“In the second phase – when the candidates have already passed their exams – I watch them doing their job and warn them before a mistake is made. We cannot make any mistake during our type of work”.

The curriculum leads to the desired learning outcomes when a certain level of discipline is ensured. The educator assigns relevant tasks and watches them done within a certain timeframe.

“Online communication helps to control whether tasks that have been assigned are done on time. Homework must be done”.

The educator considers mindfulness important, sharing her own way of experiencing emotions and encouraging the students to do the same. It should enhance understanding of a selected method and the value of its application.

“To be able to give names to feelings as well as to demonstrate the relation between happenstance and the emotions it evolves”.

Physical touch and sensory experience allow to have insight and understand the nature of speech therapy exercises.

“I must touch participants very often and look at their faces, their tongues. They have to experiment with their bodies and do various extraordinary tasks that require physical touch”.

Moderating discussion leads to better involvement and participation. The students may share their viewpoints and have them confronted with others.

“I think this ability to open up a discussion may stimulate students, so it is good to find something controversial to be discussed in a group”.

The educator who values teamwork usually chooses this form of active education so that the students can play various roles.

“I make efforts to encourage students to have their own ideas and play roles which may bring them new experience. They may find themselves good at playing a certain role or at leadership”.

One of the educators emphasises a good understanding of the content. It may be achieved if there is consistency between the personal or behavioural features of

the educator and the message he wants to deliver. One of the ways to achieve this is to refer to one's own experience.

“This is a message of who you are, what you live up to, what is the pace of your speech, even the way you move, the way you ask questions etc. This is the proper way to make people understand”.

The reconstructions are the evidence of the educators' approaches with respect to the learning process and the expected learning outcomes. The individual concepts address different qualities that appear important for educators. These are: practising and experiencing, non-directive support, unconditional respect as the basis for proper support of a person, and enhancing personal responsiveness.

## **Discussion**

Both differences and similarities appeared in the assumptions and the learning outcomes reconstructed during the interviews. The first group of concepts, presented in Table 1, is focused on **practising and experiencing**. Systematic training is the most obvious example of “learning by doing”. The educator's approach based on experiential learning is concentrated on action. It may include direct physical touch or moderating discussion that leads to greater involvement and participation of learners. Both individual and collective forms of practical tasks matter.

**Table 1.** Practicing and experiencing

approaches/principle	expected implications
exercise	mastery, proficiency
learning by doing, experiencing	competence
physical touch	experience
moderating discussion	participation
teamwork	role-playing experience

**Practising and experiencing** refers to Kolb's concept of experiential learning. In the experiential learning theory, the experience matters most in learning. Learning is defined in the experiential learning theory as “...the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, Kolb, 2009, p. 298). The educators pointed out that it is not only experiencing, but also its implications given practical implementation that prove the practical approach is valuable.

**Non-directive support** is the approach that includes various components such as: understanding the learners, individualisation, respect for the cognitive diversity and also sharing the educator’s experience to show more options. Making people aware of possible strategies they can consider or supporting the learners’ autonomy may also enhance the practical outcomes of the learning process. It is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Non-directive support

approaches/principle	expected implications
understanding the learner	involvement, commitment
(recognition of) individual perspective	understanding based on one’s own experience
learner-centred approach	autonomy, competence
cognitive diversity	methodological variations
understanding, sharing experience	transformative learning
supporting autonomy	competence
reference to one’s own experience, consistency	understanding

This kind of approach also refers to other theoretical backgrounds. These include Knowles’s (2020) adult learning theory, which emphasises individual qualities and practical application. The critical learning outcome is reflected in the learner’s ability to reframe the world’s perspective as an implication of transformative learning. According to Mezirow (2003, p. 58), “Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change”. We also assumed that the phenomenographic method can enhance science teaching by developing students’ understanding of scientific concepts, improving learning outcomes, and identifying effective instructional methods (Han & Ellis, 2019).

Involvement and participation are perceived as an implication of the approach based on caring and facilitates setting up good relationships. The educator’s patience may help in achieving better learning outcomes. **Unconditional respect as the basis for proper support of a person** is the source of the approaches shown in Table 3.

Carl Rogers identified three conditions that influence the creation of important relationships in educational interactions. He theorised that when educators employed empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard, the learning



**Table 3.** Unconditional respect as the basis for proper support of a person

approaches/principle	expected implications
relatedness	involvement
conducive learning environment	thriving creativity
patience	proper learning outcomes

implications brought positive outcomes (Swan et al., 2020 [after:] Rogers et al., 2013).

According to Knowles (2020), it is also important that educators provide physical conditions that are comfortable and conducive to interaction, accept the learners as persons of worth, build relationships of mutual trust and helpfulness among the learners by encouraging cooperative activities and refraining from inducing competitiveness and judgmentalness.

The next group of concepts refers to **directive instruction**, and is presented in Table 4. Training pharmacists or engine drivers and lifeguards is somewhat stricter than in other areas of education. Either procedures or instructions are rather specific to ensure correctness. Developing apprentice–master relationship is crucial for better understanding the strict rules and proper working habits until they become unconscious competence. In apprentice–master relationship, the educator pays attention to correct and accurate learner performance. Also, a certain level of discipline is inevitable. The educator assigns relevant tasks and watches them done within a certain timeframe.

**Table 4.** Directive instruction

approaches/principle	expected implications
procedures	strict application
indicating mistakes	correctness
apprentice-master relationship	learning from the master's experience
indicating mistakes	accurate performance
setting requirements	discipline

The correctness of tasks assigned by teachers is one of the core principles of Herbart's concept of pedagogy. In his works he indicated: "The educational process is carried out by three different components, interacting and necessary to achieve its objective: management, discipline and teaching. True education is called 'discipline' (Zucht)" (Somr & Hrušková, 2014, p. 417).

**Enhancing personal responsiveness** is the last set of approaches identified by the researcher. It can be achieved by introducing interdisciplinarity that broadens perspectives by considering various options in applying knowledge. Strengthening mindfulness may enhance understanding and facilitate the application of acquired competencies. This approach is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Enhancing personal responsiveness

approaches/principle	expected implications
interdisciplinarity	widening perspective, applicability
mindfulness	reflection, responsibility

Educators emphasise various perspectives implied by interdisciplinarity, whereas Mezirow also involves an interpersonal dimension with feedback that helps to take another's perspective into account (Mezirow, 2013, pp. 59–60). The teacher's professionalism in professional training is mostly associated with in-depth specialised knowledge and teaching-method agency (Pituła & Grzyb, 2022, p. 125).

There are various implications of these approaches, such as accurate performance, autonomy, commitment, competence, correctness, discipline, experience, involvement, learning from the master's experience, mastery, proficiency, methodological variations, participation, reflection, responsibility, role-playing, strict application, thriving creativity, transformative learning, understanding, widening perspective.

## **Conclusion**

The paper reflects a range of approaches that educators consider important for the learning outcomes or a learning process in adult learning. Approaches to the learning process may consider flexibility, enhance the learner's planning and organisation skills, their abilities in problem recognition and solving, negotiation skills, analysis skills, or trust-building ability leading to improved reliability. Some adult learners may need help in developing their communication or collaboration skills, peer learning may require group facilitation and incentives that would encourage innovativeness and creativity. Various methods and approaches may be applied, such as instruction, guiding, demonstrating, correcting, coaching, mentoring, tutoring, counselling, and facilitating. As far as self-reliance is concerned,

educators may consider providing feedback based on achievements related to knowledge, skills or attitudes that the learner demonstrates and of which she or he may not be aware of. Motivating and explaining the sense of learning, offering unconditional respect and reinforcing the learner helps build her or his own self-awareness, which may be important for learning and the desired transition.

Some educators' statements align with selected theoretical models or concepts found in pedagogical literature. Educators indicated the need to accept the learners and respect their feelings and ideas, which reflects the principles of teaching by Knowles (2020). The need for practising and experiencing represented in the educators' assumptions reflects the experiential learning concept (Kolb, 2014). Learning as competence development (Illeris, 2002) includes components such as understanding, motivation, and communication, all mentioned in the educators' reconstructions. Educators apply a learner-centred approach based on Rogers' (1995) concept of a way of being. The assumption that helping learners to identify new options and facilitate the transition to a desired status reflects Mezirow's concept of transformative learning (Clark & Wilson, 2016).

The authors focused on the educators' introspection while making no reference to the learners – their backgrounds or foregrounds, age or status etc. The focus was intentional, and the concentration on the educators' roles allowed for identifying various approaches reconstructed by a heterogeneous group of practitioners. Further research may be considered with respect to the conformity or selection of approaches following the learners' needs, expectations, or requirements.

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