



Developing Essential Skills for Further Education or Employment: A Case from Perth, Western Australia

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Abstract

Lifelong learning is part of important educational policies, which are generally developed to ensure that adults are provided with opportunities to either further their education or to complete their education process, which could have been interrupted for various reasons. It also provides learners with training opportunities, particularly a certain group who is seeking employment. However, there is more to the concept of lifelong learning than just this traditional definition. Nowadays, the lifelong learning concept applies to learning that occurs throughout ones' life and it involves various social groups; it also takes place at either a formal, non-formal or informal learning setting. The paper intends to provide an overview of how the concept of lifelong learning is applied by a training organization in Perth, Western Australia, known as Centacare Employment and Training. It will provide an overview of its main programs and how they are delivered to the target groups. The objective of this paper is to identify some of main characteristics of adult learning and how they can be used to inform higher education teaching methodologies and policies, so that they have a positive effect on this group of the society and on the society in general. In addition, the methodology that will be used for the paper is based on observations and hands on teaching experience within this setting, as well as supported by the examination of the literature available for this topic. Finally, the results of this paper will be delivered as recommendations, which can be adopted by HE institutions or relevant actors responsible for the drafting of educational policies.

Keywords: education policy, lifelong learning, adult learners, Language Literacy Numeracy and Digital Literacy Program

1. Introduction

The concept of lifelong learning acquired a new meaning in the educational context where the focus shifted from the formal educational setting to a less formal context, and at the centre of the process is no more the teaching of the new knowledge, but rather the learning and practising of what is acquired. The focus was not any more the teacher but the individual, who was the initiator of the whole learning process and was responsible for one's own development and chose the learning programme according to his/her own needs. Lifelong learning programmes developed as either accredited vocational trainings or professional development courses provided by job providers or organized by management bodies.

The most valuable element in lifelong learning is its emphasis that all learning is embedded learning – it takes

place in and from a specific context for quite specific purposes and returns to affect and shape that context. And it sees 'adult education' as the encouragement and maximisation of learning more than the provision of courses (Roger & Horrocks, 2010:6). The adult learning environment is related either to the daily life needs or provided for work purposes. This informal learning has revived the interest in adult learning and various learning theories have re-emerged to be adapted to the present context.

Abraham Maslow (1970), proposed a theory of human motivation centred on a hierarchy of human needs, ranging from physiological needs at the lowest level to self-esteem and the need for self-actualisation at the highest level. According to Maslow's pyramid of needs, learning is a process with people attempting to fulfill their individual potential and it is a form of self-actualisation (Belanger, 2011:36) Therefore, from the perspective of education what we are trying to achieve is not only identifying the best teaching techniques but most importantly we need to find ways of establishing a relationship with the adult learner. They usually use this relationship as the basis for their own personal development, which ultimately leads to their self-actualisation.

Maslow's contribution as a therapist and educator combined with the work of Carl Rogers, also a therapist and educator lead to the development of the **humanist theory** of learning¹. Opposing the views of behaviourist theories, where the response was conditioned from any stimuli, the humanist theory highlights the importance of the relationship between the teacher as a facilitator, who facilitates the adult learner to actualise his or her own potential. The learner is at the centre of the process, and he/she can control the process.

The key concepts of the humanist theory are related to self-actualisation, learning experience and significant learning (Belanger, 2011:37). There is an intrinsic motivation for this group of learners to develop, to become autonomous and to improve themselves in any of the learning areas. They also use their accumulated experience and apply it on the learning process. Their learning experience is based on situations that they have lived through combined with the practical reflection. Learning becomes important when it is relevant, and as a result it bears a subjective meaning. The learner is able to relate his/her learning to any former experience or to the current context. Then, learning becomes progressive as they can see that they are benefiting from it and that their knowledge is increasing, and they are achieving their learning goals. Once they realize that they have achieved something by themselves, this evolves proportionally with their self-confidence and autonomy to complete future actions.

Another theory that best reflects the adult learning situation is **experiential learning theory (ELT)**, which gives experience a central place (Kolb & Kolb, pg. 194). According to this theory the learner's past experiences provide a meaningful basis for further learning, and it is action oriented, therefore, the whole theory is about action learning and at the heart of ELT is constructivist learning. The theory puts forward six propositions with a central permeating idea, which conceives learning as a process, "whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984: 41 at Kolb & Kolb, 2005:194).

Adult learners approach the learning process not only with the experience, which is related directly to the subject matter under study, but also with the total life experiences that they have accumulated throughout their life. Therefore, the teacher should focus on the experience that they have and encourage adult learners to own and value their previous experiences, so that they can be better optimized and utilized for the current learning context. The teacher builds on what adult learners already know so that they learners re-examine and modify the new understandings.

Vygotsky's constructivist learning theory (1978) emphasizes that people construct new knowledge and understanding from what they already know and based on their previous experience provided that they are supported and challenged at the same time. However, different from formal education settings, which are more competitive, and the focus is on the challenges, adult learning settings require a balance between the two. "Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning, while positive feelings of attraction and interest may be essential for learning" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005:208). Providing positive encouragements statements and inciting their interest in what they are learning are crucial elements for adult learners.

1.1 A brief introduction to Centacare, its mission and programme

As for the above, the humanist, the existential and constructivist learning approaches along with the urge for self-

¹ "In the 1960s and 1970s, two specialists, both of them therapists and educators, Abraham Maslow, well-known for his "hierarchy of needs", and Carl Rogers, famous for his work on the personal relationship between facilitator and learner, developed the *humanist theory of learning*" at Paul Belanger, *Theories in Adult Learning and Education*, Verlag Barbara Budrich, pg. 35. Downloaded on 23 Mar 2022 <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvbkjx77.7>

actualisation, promotion of action learning and providing a safe and emotionally positive environment along with other important elements are at the core of the education setting provided by the Centcare Employment and Training organization². It has been operating since 1976 and provides its education programs, training courses and other support services to people, who belong to different age groups including both youth and mature-age students (15-67 years old) from a wide-range of cultural and social backgrounds.

The education program operates a rolling intake, where students can study for up to two years and the aim of the program is to provide literacy, language, numeracy, and Digital Literacy training to job seekers. The organization has been working with the SEE (Skills for Education and Employment) program for 45 years. The course curriculum is based on the CGEA (Certificate of General Education for Adults), and the units are mapped to the ACSF (Australian Core Skills Framework). The core skills covered at different levels include learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy which are assessed based on performance indicators.

One of the most prominent features of the SEE program delivered by Centacare Training and Employment is that it is based on a competence-based curriculum, where students must demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a learning environment that promotes their problem-solving skills and enhances their skills for completing tasks which are related to real-world situations.

The majority of the students belong to different social and cultural backgrounds and with a vast age range, which makes it difficult to use teaching materials from a selected coursebook or based on a rigid curriculum. Therefore, teachers are always thinking about the most important elements for their students to take away from an activity and most importantly how to demonstrate their learning. They are designing their own course materials and assessment tasks with a view to providing students with the space and the opportunity to show their level of understanding about the content learned. It is a flexible way of learning and assessment where the tasks allow for mistakes to be made, and then corrected where students are provided with an opportunity to explain the process.

1.2 Alignment of Centacare training practice with the principles of adult learning

The curriculum underpins the teaching and learning cycle at Centacare and should form the basis of teacher practice at every stage of that cycle. The curriculums used at Centacare are competency-based curriculums³, which support the underpinning principles of adult learning where there is no pass or fail:

- A competency-based curriculum is criterion based. This means learners are not assessed in competition against others but against a standardised benchmark.
- A competency-based curriculum is evidence based. This means that decisions about whether a person is competent are based upon evidence gathered from the person being assessed.
- A competency-based curriculum is participatory. This means that the person to be assessed is involved in the process of assessment.

The theories mentioned in this paper developed for adult learning lay down several principles, which have been adopted by Centacare both in the provision of their training programmes, as well as in the Professional Development programmes organized regularly for the teaching staff. The following principles apply to the adult learning setting, and they are further elaborated based on class observations and study of the Professional Development modules drafted for Centacare teaching staff, as well as based on the teaching materials and tasks, which are made available for all the staff at a shared resources drive referred to as the P-drive.

1. Human beings have a natural potentiality for learning.

This principle implies that everyone can learn without discrimination regardless of our background or abilities, we are all born with that potential. Similarly, to the intelligences (visual, kinaesthetic, verbal, musical etc.,) which we are born with, adult learners possess the learning potential, however, due to various conditions or factors in their life, this potential has not been fully developed or it might have been early terminated. Therefore, providers of adult learning need to establish an optimal learning environment along with a positive relationship between teacher and learner to allow for this potential to be appropriately developed.

2. Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for

² More information on Centacare Employment and Training and the SEE Program can be found on the following link: <https://www.centacarewa.com.au>

³ The information is taken from the dedicated PD modules (Module 3 A Unit of competency) developed by the organization as part of their internal Professional Development Program. <https://centacarewacomau.sharepoint.com/sites/SEETeacherTraining/SitePages/Module-3--A-unit-of-competency.aspx>

overt purposes.

Assessment and pre-assessment tasks used by Centacare teachers are developed in a way that apply the principle of relatedness to their own purposes. Since the participants of the courses are either job seekers or they would like to pursue further studies, the variety of tasks meet their personal goals and purposes. Another example that best illustrates this principle was the collection of responses from students at the beginning of the course. Once they were introduced to the main topics and content, they were asked about their expectations and reasons for attending it. Their responses were all related to personal reasons and goals such as mentioning that they want to seek further education, or better employment opportunities. Some of them were happy to have been given an opportunity that they might have missed earlier in their life. This type of learner appreciates the second chance and work responsibly throughout the course.

3. Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.

Adult learners own the process and are responsible for their own learning since they are the agency that initiates the whole learning process. Despite having initial doubts or lacking self-confidence, which could be related to any previous failure within the formal education setting, ultimately everyone met the required outcomes.

4. Much significant learning is acquired through doing and repetition.

The whole teaching and learning process at Centacare revolves around the doing and performing of the task. Once learners perform the task and improve along the process, their motivation also increases. Personally, I have observed learners with a different attitude when the course started, and they changed by the end of the course once they had reached their self-actualization. Their sense of worthiness, realization and achievement turns into a drive that takes the process onto another level. They complete the task on time and the teacher can easily obtain from them the necessary evidence to support the successful completion of the task. This is encouraging for both the learner, who is willing to take on more responsibilities and the teacher, who can provide this group of learners with more practice opportunities.

5. Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner – feelings as well as intellect – are the most lasting and pervasive.

Adult learners need to initiate the process on their own. They are different from other learners' groups where the process can be initiated either from the teacher in the classroom or at home, from an adult, who in their perception plays the role of someone who is supposed to guide and teach you. Adult learners, on the other hand, would position themselves at the same level as teachers. They come with their own life experiences, which they actualise and use during their learning process. They can assume different roles during this process, either as someone who needs your help as a teacher and requests that openly, or as someone who is struggling and would not like to lose their face in front of other adults. Their feelings also play an important role in the learning process and both the affective and cognitive aspects have an effect on the outcomes.

6. Providing a safe and less challenging or competitive environment.

Life-long learning has come to be known with different terms in the educational theories, however, the broad definition would be any learning that takes place in a less formal education setting. It is a learner-centred process with the teacher being the facilitator and it does not come with the anxiety of passing or failing. It can either be called as Professional Development or adult learning, however, both place the learner at the centre of the process. The cohort studying at Centacare are less confident learners who will benefit from a learning environment that is validating, encouraging, relevant, and supportive of risk-taking.

One way that Centacare achieves this principle is through its placement process where it makes sure that learners are placed at the right level, which will not be so challenging for them and safe, in terms of feeling less anxiety or stress for the fact whether you will pass or fail.

The placement of learners in the appropriate level is done following a pre-assessment procedure,⁴ which is broad both in its scope and complexity to enable learners to work through until they reach their ceiling or limit. Materials that are used as the basis for the assessment generally reflect real texts and tasks. The tasks used during the pre-assessment procedure are selected based on the information that is collected from the learner during the interview stage, so the variety of the context varies from a personal to a community one or it could be related to work or further education purposes. It is common that the learners' level will show a spiky pattern as they might have different levels across the core skills. The spiky pattern is best understood for native adult learners, who normally have very high oral or reading skills, but they demonstrate lower levels at writing. The CGEA curriculum is not rigid, and it provides teachers with flexible

⁴ State of Victoria Department of Education and Training (2018), *CGEA Implementation Guide 2018*. Downloaded on 6 April 2022 <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/rto/Pages/courses.aspx#link45>

choices when selecting the units, which can either be above or below the level that the learner is studying, with the view of providing additional skill enhancement in specific targeted areas. These units can be selected as elective units along with the core units that the curriculum provides for.

7. The focus is on the process and not on the product

All the pre-teaching materials and the assessment tasks that are used by Centacare request that the learner focuses on the process rather than the product. The completion of the task is usually broken down into simpler steps, which in fact highlight the various stages of the learning process or the employment of the various skills while completing the task. For example, while completing a literacy task or for learners to develop their literacy skills, there are several steps involved such as, identifying, understanding, interpreting, creating, communicating, and then using the material within a wide variety of context. Each of the steps can be interpreted as a different skill that they employ progressing from the lower thinking skills towards the higher order thinking skills.

Another example is when students are completing a numeracy task. They are first asked to order the item from the smallest to the biggest, than they might be given a text with gaps where they can fill in the missing words “greater than”, “less than”, “more” or “less” and then they are asked to perform some simple numerical operations and estimate the answer, with the final answer being the exact number and they are asked to demonstrate how they came to that result, for instance in the numeracy task, “show the workings”.

In addition, students are asked not only to interpret the data of the graph or chart but even to be involved in the process with statements such as: “draw a graph with the information”; “label the axes”; or in the project-based task they are always asked about the process, for example, with wh-word questions inquiring about what information they are using, who helped them find the information or where did they find the information. Another example for project-based tasks focusing on the process rather than the product is the logbook, which students use to record the steps that they performed while completing the project. While focusing on the steps or on the process, this helps learners to identify their learning strategies, which they can then re-apply for a different set of skills and the learning process turns into an upward spiral progressing from one level to the other.

As a result, Centacare ensures that their teaching resources⁵, both the teaching materials and the assessment tasks also adhere to adult learning principles. They ensure that the materials used throughout the course have the following features:

– **Authentic**

Adults learn best when course materials are drawn from real world situations and relevant to their lives; learning materials should be contextualised where possible. When using authentic texts, which relate to learners’ interests and needs, this will allow learners to be exposed to communication rules that are required to be respected in real life situation. Therefore, the CGEA curriculum⁶ provides for the use of authentic texts and supports the engagement of learners in the four social contexts of literacy – family and social life, workplace, education, community, and civic life.

The use of authentic texts also helps teachers to gauge what are their learners’ actual skills and knowledge, in order to draft a teaching plan, which will equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the requirements of the above social contexts. The texts and materials that are used by Centacare staff are taken from real life settings, which vary from a more personal domain to the community related issues. They are authentic because they are created for a special purpose and having an audience in mind within a particular environment.

Some examples of authentic texts, which are used as either pre-teaching materials or assessment tasks include the following:

- community notices and calendars
- local council communications
- utility bills
- shopping catalogues
- ATM screens
- workplace rosters
- maps of community facilities

⁵ Downloaded on 16 March 2022

<https://centacarewacomau.sharepoint.com/sites/SEETeacherTraining/SitePages/Pre-teaching.aspx>

⁶ State of Victoria Department of Education and Training (2018), CGEA Implementation Guide 2018. Downloaded on 6 April 2022
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/rto/Pages/courses.aspx#link45>

- newspaper articles
- blogs
- journal articles
- digital stories

– **Purposeful**

Adults learn best when they can apply their learning to practical situations. Their learning is usually more effective when there is a strong connection between the content, the social interaction, and their lives. Some useful approaches would be the use of activities that are problem-based, task-based and project-based learning. For example, the use of activities with laminated cards, where each of the cards shows a specific situation, such as someone who could be sick and then learners are invited to give advice or what will they do in that situation. Moreover, oracy topics and materials could be related to any of a wide variety of situations from their daily lives. Instead of bringing tangible objects in the classroom or when abstract notions are involved, the teacher can use laminated cards for food items, clothing, feelings, music instruments or for situations including doctor's appointment, shopping,

– **Technology-rich**

Digital skills are part of the curriculum, and they are provided to ensure that students can function in an increasingly digital world. Some of the assessment tasks have incorporated the digital or web-based task as the CGEA curriculum⁷ also added the term "web-based texts" in the Engage units. The term refers to interactive web sites and should not include screen-based word-processed documents or screenshots of the text as reading online requires a different set of skills from reading paper-based text. Online text or otherwise known as hypertexts is multidimensional, allowing text, graphics, audio, video, animation, hyperlinking, and other features to add to the reading experience and support comprehension. This supports the development and application of different reading strategies.

– **Interactive**

Social connections and opportunities to interact have been found to have significant benefits to adult learners in basic education contexts. Kinesthetic activities require a combination of a variety of skills, including specific skills (listening, speaking, reading) and social skills necessary for the social interaction in that situation. Some of these activities could be listening and sequencing the images of the story, barrier games where students are asked to listen to the instructions and perform the action required, role-playing, and acting out a specific situation and then students are asked to order the images as a sequence of the events or put in the right sequence cut out texts.

2. Conclusions and Recommendations

The 21st century skills including critical thinking, cooperative learning and the development of digital skills are being highlighted in every research and teaching context; however, the traditional classroom instruction does not allow for students to be fully engaged, take ownership of their work, and activate their higher-order thinking skills. The Albanian curriculum is based on competence-based learning, but assessment is not criterion or evidence based like the Australian equivalent and the teaching materials are not designed to take into consideration how you can record the development of competence and what evidence can you use to ensure any possible achievements or progress.

The findings and observations that have been used for the writing of this paper can be easily transferred to the Albanian context and ensure that our teaching practice is adapted and reflects the principles of adult learning. Even though our education context is different from the one that is provided by organizations such as Centacare Employment and Training in Perth, Western Australia, its good practice, and models provide a useful starting point for a much-desired change.

There is a common practice that the teaching staff at Centacare design their own course materials and assessment tasks with a view to providing students with the space and the opportunity to show their level of understanding about the content learned. This is a flexible way of learning and assessing as the tasks allow for mistakes to be made, and the students are provided with an opportunity to explain the process, or the teacher can provide support. The level of support changes depending on the level of the student, where lower-level students require more support from the teacher.

This way of learning and teaching allows for constant practice, different from the Albanian teaching context where teachers stay faithful to the textbooks and bring limited additional resources in the classroom. In this way, not all students

⁷ State of Victoria Department of Education and Training (2018), *CGEA Implementation Guide 2018*. Downloaded on 6 April 2022 <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/rto/Pages/courses.aspx#link45>

are provided equally with the opportunity to show or demonstrate their learning, which is so necessary especially when new concepts are introduced in the classroom.

The topics and the pre-teaching activities along with the tasks provide a series of learning benefits and opportunities, such as the opportunity to consolidate and apply the knowledge and skills in a real context and for a real purpose; learners engage and are exposed to a wide variety of text types or authentic materials, which have been written for different purposes and for different audiences.

Another important issue to be tackled on is the lack of motivation. One of the adult learning principles is to find ways how to tap on their motivation and this can be done by appealing to their real-life situations and experiences. It is difficult to acquire new knowledge in a decontextualized or isolated way. Learners need to relate to what is familiar to them and teachers should slowly progress from the familiar situation to the unfamiliar or to the unknown one. This will motivate the learners and their real-life experiences can be used as a starting point for their further development.

This goes along with the principle that we need to focus not only on the cognitive abilities and skills of our learners but also the affectionate ones. Stress and anxiety impede the learning process. Therefore, any successful program should provide a non-threatening education environment where we build on the strengths of the learners and develop their skills and abilities through topics that relevant to their lives outside of the classroom.

One way of achieving it is by using authentic materials, which could apply to different contexts and for different purposes. These materials can be organized around certain themes or topics; or through logical association of ideas and practice; or around learners' interests, objectives, goals, or prior knowledge; or they can refer to a problem, issue which can vary from the personal to the community domain; or they can be organised around a set of skills or tasks.

Another goal of this study was to throw light on the resources available for teachers while teaching this cohort. Centacare has a well-organized bank of resources and materials that is made available to the staff. It is known as the P-drive and it can be remotely accessed by the teachers. It contains not only teaching materials and resources but also materials of an administrative nature that help the teacher perform their job more effectively. Furthermore, there is an induction training provided to new teachers, which consist of coaching with one of the coordinators as well as completion of online learning modules. In addition, Centacare already has in place an internal Professional Development training program, which is delivered by teachers to their peer colleagues.

The English Department can also benefit from this practice that Centacare has had for several years now. Teachers do not only attend PD training organised internally, but they are also referred to external PD trainings when deemed necessary or if they address any issues of interest. It is an organised practice that has proved to be efficient and useful so far.

In conclusion, referring to the assessment of students which is a positive practice that can be transferred and applied even in the Albanian teaching context. Our pre-service teachers should be encouraged to use it either in the formal classroom settings or in other teaching and learning contexts that they will be working as teachers of English.

The assessment of learners requires the development of assessment tools, which consist of assessment instruments/tasks and procedures to gather, record, and evaluate the evidence of learner's performance. The assessment instrument could include either oral and written questions; observation/demonstration checklists; projects, case studies, or portfolios. The development of assessment instruments/tasks and the procedures that follow the process is based on the principles of contextualised learning and learning materials and tasks are also developed in this way.

This positive experience and model should be transferred to our teaching context, which is burdened with theory and the assessment focuses more on the knowledge rather than on the skills and the abilities to perform. The introduction of this type of assessment instrument will benefit our learners and will bring them closer to the real-life contextualised learning and practice. However, such overarching changes, which affect not only the approaches and techniques that teachers are using in the classroom but also the curriculum require the intervention of higher education policies to be developed and approved for the education institutions to employ. It requires not only formalized policies but also a change in the mindset of our teachers to embrace this change.

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