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An overview of lifelong learning practices, with an emphasis on the 'Grundtvig' action

Γενική θεώρηση πρακτικών δια βίου μάθησης, με έμφαση στη δράση 'Grundtvig'

Angeliki ANAGNOSTOPOULOU & Alexandra ATHANASIOU

Nowadays, it is generally accepted that the pivotal concern of the Educational and Training policy of Europe revolves around the enhancement of employment and growth opportunities within the broader scope of innovation and knowledge. Towards that end, the creation of a modernized and at the same time strong European Social Model of a 'knowledge economy' is anticipated. Recognizing the increasing workforce competition within Europe along with the growing significance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), the European Union is preparing to face the technological and the social challenges which will constitute the starting point towards achieving the objectives of increased employment and social welfare. Within the above described context, the present research aims at examining the impact of putting into effect components of the European Lifelong Learning Programme focusing on the Grundtvig action and its sub-division, Learning Partnerships.

Ω

Στην εποχή μας, είναι γεγονός, ότι κύριο ενδιαφέρον της εκπαιδευτικής πολιτικής της Ευρώπης είναι η ενδυνάμωση της απασχολησιμότητας και της ευρύτερης ανάπτυξης στο γενικότερο πλαίσιο της καινοτομίας και της γνώσης με στόχο τη δημιουργία ενός μοντέρνου και ταυτόχρονα ισχυρού Ευρωπαϊκού κοινωνικού μοντέλου 'οικονομίας με γνώμονα την απόκτηση γνώσης'. Αναγνωρίζοντας τον αυξανόμενο ανταγωνισμό στον τομέα της εργασίας στην Ευρώπη με τη σπουδαιότητα του τρίπτυχου Τεχνολογίας-Πληροφορίας-Επικοινωνίας να αυξάνεται, η Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση προετοιμάζεται να αντιμετωπίσει τις τεχνολογικές και κοινωνικές προκλήσεις οι οποίες θα αποτελέσουν την αφετηρία προς την επίτευξη των στόχων για πλήρη απασχόληση και κοινωνική ευημερία. Σε αυτά τα πλαίσια, η παρούσα μελέτη στοχεύει στο να εξετάσει τον αντίκτυπο της εφαρμογής πτυχών του προγράμματος Δια Βίου Μάθησης εστιάζοντας στο πρόγραμμα που αφορά στην εκπαίδευση ενηλίκων, Grundtvig, μαζί με μια από τις υποδιαιρέσεις του, τις εκπαιδευτικές συμπράξεις.

Key words: Lifelong Learning Program, Grundtvig action, Learning Partnerships

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that in recent years the challenge of a knowledge-based society constituted the core of the Educational and Training Policy of Europe. Towards making Europe more competitive by integrating employment and growth, the modernized European Social Model of a 'knowledge economy' has emerged. This model is likely to provide European citizens with essential skills-based knowledge in the form of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), which constitute significant tools for job creation.

Within the above described framework, the aim of the present study is to outline the effects of efficiently implementing aspects of the European Lifelong Learning Programme so as for Second Chance School adult learners to become active, not only as Greek but also as European citizens. More specifically, the specific research presents the European Union's principles and policies for Adult Education and Training via the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) within Second Chance School framework while analyzing one of its aspects, i.e., the Grundtvig Action, its policy context and structure. In the Grundtvig context, the parameters of Learning Partnerships and how they are likely to be put into effect when training Second Chance adult learners are also described.

2. Towards a Europe of innovation and knowledge

2.1. The contribution of the Lisbon Strategy to promoting a European Social Model

The adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in March 2000, i.e. the European Union's overarching program focusing on growth and jobs, has provided significant momentum to the European Education and policy. Within this framework, the aim of the Lisbon European council formed on the 23rd and 24th of March 2000 in order to take long-term measures on the basis of the above mentioned 'Lisbon Strategy' was primarily to "invigorate the Community's policies, against the backdrop of the most promising economic climate for a generation in the Member States" (The Lisbon Special European Council, 2008).

To further elaborate on the goal of the Lisbon Special European Council previously referred to and how it could possibly relate to the Educational and Training policy of Europe, two trends influencing the European economy and society will be mentioned. First of all, the fact that workforce competition within the European bosom is rising due to the renowned 'globalization' notion; secondly, the growing importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in all sectors of life demands a thorough and at times exhaustive examination of the Education system in Europe for potential reforming, along with guaranteed lifelong learning opportunities.

To develop economic growth, the Commission intends to attract more people to the employment market and encourage them to remain active, to improve the adaptability and flexibility of the labor markets and to definitely invest more in human capital by improving education and skills (Spring European Council, 2005)(A new start for the Lisbon Strategy, 2005). To even more effectively accomplish that aim thus contributing to an efficiently innovative and knowledgeable Europe, the Commission has set up a Lifelong Learning Programme having officially launched its action plan in September 2007 (EACEA, 2003).

2.2. Connecting the Lisbon Strategy to Adult Education and Training

In connection to the above mentioned lifelong learning policies, adult learning seems to be a vital component. Based on Widdowson (1983: 6-8), adult education and training are two fundamental terms which can be defined as follows: adult education refers to the development and acquisition of a generic knowledge, whereas training provides learners “with the restricted competence they need to meet their requirements”. What is more, they both constitute essential factors to “competitiveness and employability, social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development across Europe” (European Commission, 2009a)(European Commission-Educational Training, 2009).

At this particular point, it should be stressed that there are varying definitions concerning adult learning. For example, Rogers claims that adult education relates to “the international interdisciplinary study of adults as learners and/or trainees of all types and in all environments” (Rogers, 1996). However, the term ‘adults’ seems to be a prevalent notion throughout the specific research being defined as “people over the statutory school-leaving age...” (OECD, 1997). In this framework, the previously mentioned term ‘adult’ should be essentially viewed in the light of the following adulthood-oriented characteristics as mentioned in Sifakis (2008: 250):

- they (adults) are in a continuing process of growth, not at the start of a process
- they bring with them a package of experience and values
- they come to education with intentions
- they bring expectations about the learning process
- they have competing interests
- they already have their own set of patterns of learning

These characteristics are undoubtedly valid especially when considering English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners’ needs and an accompanying teaching methodology. For instance, in the case of Second Chance Schools, the specific learners seem to possess the above elaborated profile of the adult student/participant who is:

- voluntarily involved in learning
- conscious of the learning process as a necessary step towards his/her personal and/or academic/vocational fulfillment
- conscious of and reflective on, to a considerable degree, their own learning preferences and difficulties (Sifakis, 2008: 166)

In the stated definitions above, adulthood appears to be relating not only to age but also to each learner’s unique social and cultural characteristics (ibid). Moreover, within European policy discussions and in agreement with the description of the adulthood – oriented characteristics mentioned earlier, adulthood refers to people who have potentially abandoned initial education and training; these people are at this point making a rigorous effort to readjust to a variety of training systems in or outside formal education with the aim to continue learning for personal, civic, social as well as employment-related purposes (European Commission, 2009b) (European Commission-Education & Training, 2009).

In the light of the aforementioned, The Reference Framework, drawn by the European Council stated earlier (The European Parliament and the council of the European Union, 2006) (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2006), sets out eight key competencies which can be summarized into the following:

- Communication in foreign languages
- Digital competence,
- Learning to learn skills (the ability to learn independently)
- Social and civic competencies
- Cultural awareness and
- Expression

These competencies in essence constitute fundamental adult education principles. Specifically, learning how to function within society by bringing in prior life experience and previous learning are primary adult learning benchmarks, which can contribute to a successful life in a knowledge-based society and economy. Such adult learning themes as learners' existing experience modified in the form of critical thinking, learning strategies such as problem solving and decision making, initiative and creativity in decision making when negotiating syllabus topics and many more (Sifakis, 2008: 148,150) play a great role in learners' acquiring the eight competencies being crucial for their personal, professional and social development.

2.3. Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP)

As mentioned above, the eight competencies adult learners are required to attain through their education programs are key factors not only to their own but also to their facilitators' benefit, i.e., teachers/trainers, realizing that learning takes place everywhere. What is more and according to Adult Education theory regarding the adult learners' existing knowledge and experience (Sifakis, 2008: 150), learning in contexts other than formal education "may even be more important or make more sense to the learner in his/her daily life than what is learned in the formal setting of the educational institution" (Kumpulainen, 2009).

In order to support the European citizens' right to learn in all environments, the European Commission has recognized that "nowadays lifelong learning is key to both jobs and growth and the participation of everyone in society" (European Commission, 2009a) (European Commission-Education & Training, 2009: 1). This is precisely the reason why it has integrated its varied educational and training initiatives under a single umbrella, namely the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) whose goal is to "enable individuals at all stages of their lives to pursue stimulating learning opportunities across Europe" (ibid).

As elaborated in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning in 2000, the lifelong learning programme entails the combating of social exclusion as well as the fostering of social inclusion, i.e. "giving all individuals equal opportunities to be part of a local community and to play an active role in making it better" (The Conclusions of the Consultation Platform, 2001:6) (Focusing on Lifelong Learning, 2001: 6). Fighting social exclusion means supporting people who, for such reasons as disability, age, racism, gender, social class and other, do not participate in various social events.

In addition to the acquisition of the new basic skills, the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) promotes active citizenship in the form of learning in connection to cultural diversity and

creativity which should also be expressed in agreement with different bodies on a regional, national and European level. More specifically, active citizenship concerns social responsibility and solidarity and the Lifelong Learning Programme can be a part of an active citizenship process.

3. The umbrella of lifelong learning programme (LLP) leading to the 'Grundtvig' action

3.1. The Grundtvig policy context – the programme structure and the Learning Partnerships

In section 2, mention was made to the Lisbon Strategy concerning the European Union ambitious policy of supporting economic expansion and entrepreneurship along with reinforcing social inclusion. In this context, adult education bears a profound role in raising adult learners' level of knowledge and skills primarily through supplying early school leavers with a crucial second chance as well as assisting people at a later stage in life, in remaining active via attending varied learning programs.

As a consequence of the previously stated aims, the European Union has launched, among other actions, the Grundtvig Action which constitutes an integral part of this paper. More specifically, "the Grundtvig programme focuses on the teaching and study needs of those immersed in Adult Education and alternative education streams, as well as the institutions and organizations delivering these services" (European Commission, 2009a) (European Commission-Education-Practical Learning, 2009: 1). Moreover, the Grundtvig Action of the LLP programme aims at providing adult learners with ways to improve their knowledge and skills while keeping them mentally fit and potentially more employable.

Initially put forward in 2000 in the framework of the Socrates II Programme, Grundtvig has both contributed to the development and implementation of the European Union's initiatives for a better economy and society; "it provides the vital bridge between policy and practice" (European Communities, 2008: 5) enabling, on the one hand, educators to develop innovative teaching approaches and, on the other hand, allowing learners to "cross national borders in search of new opportunities for training and knowledge" (*ibid*).

In the above Grundtvig frame, the Grundtvig Learning Partnerships constitute part of this action. According to the European Commission (2009c): 1), "a learning partnership is a framework for small-scale cooperation activities between organizations working in the field of adult education in the broadest sense". To be more specific, in a Grundtvig Learning Partnership (LP), trainers and trainees from at least three participating countries work together on one or more topics of mutual interest. This exchange of experiences, practices and methods, i.e. learning from the other, contributes to an awareness of the European cultural, social and economic diversity and leads to a better understanding of common areas of interest within adult learning.

Grundtvig Learning Partnerships constitute a major division in the context of the Lifelong Learning Programme. The reason for this is their special asset to bring a European dimension to organizations directly involved in Adult Education (CIMO, 2008). In addition, they seem to be a 'first taste of Europe' for many of the above mentioned organizations while at the same

time practitioners develop sustainable networks of professionals for exchanging experience and improving practice; what is more, Learning Partnerships (LPs) appear to foster social cohesion and intercultural dialogue thus contributing to a Europe of active citizens.

3.2. “Green terraces across Europe”: a Learning Partnership in action

In the light of the above, the target group of learners participating in the learning partnership to be examined belongs to a regional Second Chance School for adults. More specifically, according to the Greek Ministry Document on Second Chance Schools operation (2008), the law relating to the specific type of schools was passed in 1997 (article 5, 2525/1997) and concerns adult learners over the age of 18 who are in need of obtaining secondary school certification.

Within such a framework, adult learners are able to acquire basic qualifications and skills while developing their competence in Modern Greek, Mathematics, Environmental and Social issues, Foreign Languages (English) and Informatics. In addition, the Second Chance School program offers career consultation and psychological guidance as well as awareness in such practical issues as modern teaching methodologies; the latter involve new technologies, learners’ active participation and specialized teaching staff. Additionally, an innovative schedule is determined by learners’ needs most frequently dictated by the cooperation among the school, the local community, the enterprises and the education system.

To further clarify the specific school schedule, the overall duration of the Second Chance Schools program is 18 months leading to the acquisition on the part of the trainees of the official secondary school diploma equal to the equivalent certification obtained by adolescents finishing secondary education. Moreover, the trainee’s weekly participation is 21 hours comprising a great number of cognitive, cultural and environmental activities. It is also worth noting that the Second Chance School discussed in this study commenced its operation in September 2005, with a total of 85 trainees, whereas the programme itself also encompasses a number of workshops and projects.

As far as the aforementioned project work is concerned, a group of twenty trainees are required to participate in a designed Grundtvig learning partnership called ‘*Green Terraces across Europe*’. More specifically, the initial and most profound activity in this partnership engages learners in the construction of a vegetable and flower garden on top of their school building. Once the first plants have been cultivated, the trainees are expected to extract vegetables from the garden; these are going to be used as ingredients for a meal they going to prepare for their European guests since the partnership involves exchange visits during which constructing, planting and cooking experiences will have to be discussed in English.

For this reason, a special English course is going to be designed as a means of preparing trainees for interaction with other European adult learners from the corresponding countries-partners namely Romania, the coordinating country, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria and France. In reality, this tailor-made English course, which explores its learner needs in a concise manner for a short term as shown below, can be orientated as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as claimed in Sifakis (2008: 30). Therefore, to be able to handle all the associated challenges, the learners need to acquire fluency in relevant language use, something that is accomplished by means of an English course integrating all four skills-

reading, writing, speaking, listening - focusing on clear and specific objectives (Sifakis, 2008: 43).

3.3. Needs analysis findings

Designating specific learning needs for the trainees of the Second Chance School in question, through the specification of the goals, objectives and content of the English course that is going to be taught to them, is absolutely essential. In this way, the trainer planning the respective course is capable of gathering data which will help her 'to design, implement or even review and evaluate an existing program' (Nunan, 1988: 43) embodying a 'needs-based philosophy' which will maximize the effectiveness of her ESP teaching efforts (Richards, 2001: 51).

Towards meeting this end, the goal of the particular English workshop deriving from the needs analysis conducted is, on the one hand, to strengthen the Second Chance learners' communicative ability so that they can cope with welcoming trainees from the aforementioned European nations. On the other hand, according to the designed questionnaire findings, the aims/objectives of the English workshop can be viewed as a way in which all four skills can be developed on the part of the learners. What is more, the above mentioned questionnaire findings shed light on essential skills in need of improvement, for example such micro skills as reading silently, understanding recipe text-types and listening to authentic speech.

In the above context, the demographic trends resulting from the data collected through the participants' questionnaire involve the following:

- Eight of them are female and only two are male on a total of ten trainees that finally appeared (women as a vulnerable social group in need of professional skills for the attainment of full time employment).
- The permanent whereabouts of the majority (56%) seem to be in the capital of the prefecture. However, a great deal of them (34%) live in a rural area as well.
- The majority (78%) belongs to a certain vocational environment but are in need of more specialized skills so as to be rendered employable in their search for full time employment.
- The fact that most of the average learners (46%) are between 25 and 35 years old designates the exclusion of productive age from the competitiveness of contemporary labor markets.

According to the data we collected, participants' subject preferences have positioned English (80%) and Computers (70%) first in the rank, while the projects 'Related to Health' (40%) and 'Green Terraces across Europe' (30%) come next. As regards the intensive courses, the English workshop constitutes their first preference.

Concerning their English language level before the conduct of the particular English workshop, 30% of the learners have described it as quite good while another 30% have claimed that their English language knowledge had been very little up to the point the workshop was about to begin. Regarding the ways in which they have viewed the obtained knowledge in the English language upon completion of the workshop, participants have not provided any answer.

In relation to the questionnaire results, the following graph results refer to learning and teaching modes respectively. Within this framework, some highly indicative trends as to how these learners perceive teaching/learning modes are as follows: 70% have responded they could manage listening comprehension and drilling relating to grammar, syntax and pronunciation while 50% would like to enhance their speaking ability after the end of the course.

In addition to the above, 60% have responded that they like learning a foreign language through communication with foreigners as well as reading comprehension; 50% would prefer to learn from software or the internet, 40% from Television or video modes while 40% from Educational CDs. Regarding their views on innovative teaching modes implemented during the teaching/learning sessions at school, 90% of them have appeared to possess knowledge of the internet along with the social networking.

3.4. Implications

Taking all these insightful statistics into consideration, the English practitioner of the particular Second Chance School carried out a needs analysis questionnaire for the purpose of designing an intensive English course. The latter would intensify the learners' communicative competence; what is more, the conduct of the questionnaire ultimately orientated the learners' actual *needs*, being to fluently communicate with trainees from the European countries participating in the learning partnership 'Green Terraces across Europe'. In addition to this, the questionnaire constituted an indicator of the trainees' *interests*, which depicted their willingness to learn English and Computers.

The needs analysis in question also designated their learning preferences and styles thus highlighting their perception about the classroom teaching modes along with their preferred ways of learning. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire assisted in setting the learning objectives (Berggren, 1987) of the units to be designed and taught to the learners; these objectives were summarized into the development of the learners' linguistic and communicative competence for the main reason of fulfilling the aim for employment opportunities. Finally, the questionnaire resulted in promoting student motivation (*ibid*) via taking into account the students-participants' opinion on such items of the syllabus design as for instance the (non-) existence of a course book or the study workshop within the school operation hours.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of the present research constitutes an endeavor to explore the implications of putting into effect parameters of the Lifelong Learning Programme in Adult Education. Specific reference has been made to the 'Grundtvig' action within the broader scope of creating a modernized European Social Model of a 'knowledge economy' through innovative practices such as the training scheme presented in this paper.

European Lifelong learning policies were examined in the context of a strong European model which will be supportive towards its citizens, in particular such vulnerable groups as elderly people, women, migrants and the disabled, in terms of full employment opportunities and more efficient Education and Training. The Grundtvig action, along with its sub-division, the learning partnerships, all under the umbrella of the Lifelong Learning

Programme (LLP) were also presented. Having analyzed European principles about employment and growth, in relation to the adult student-participant profile, emphasis was placed on the example of the 'Green Terraces' Grundtvig Learning Partnership and how it is likely to have a positive impact in educating Second Chance adult learners.

Glossary

- The Grundtvig program is the Lifelong Learning Program (LLP) action which focuses on the teaching and study needs of those in adult education and alternative education streams, as well as the institutions and organizations delivering these services" (European Commission, 2009b) (European Commission-Education-Practical Learning,2009: 1).
- The Grundtvig Learning Partnerships according to the European Commission (2009c) European Commission (2009: 1) refer to a framework for small-scale cooperation activities between organizations working in the field of Adult Education in the broadest sense". It focuses more on the process rather than the product of learning aiming at broadening the participation of smaller organizations that want to include a European orientation in their educational activities.
- The Lifelong Learning Program constitutes a single umbrella for education and training programs thus enabling individuals at all stages of their lives to pursue stimulating learning opportunities across Europe (<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu>)
- The Lisbon Strategy is the European Union's overarching program focusing on growth and jobs, has provided significant momentum to the European Education and policy. The aim of the Lisbon European council formed on 23-24th March 2000 in order to take long-term measures on the basis of the already mentioned 'Lisbon Strategy' was primarily to "invigorate the Community's policies, against the backdrop of the most promising economic climate...(The Lisbon Special European Council, 2008: 1) among Member States".

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Angeliki Anagnostopoulou (anagn-ag@otenet.gr) holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature from the National & Kapodistrian University of Athens, a M.Ed. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the Hellenic Open University and seeks to conduct a PhD research in Applied Linguistics. She works as a teacher of English in Secondary Education currently filling in the position of the State School Advisor in Messinia Prefecture. Her research interests include Educational Policies in Europe with particular reference to European Exchange Projects, Distance Teaching/Learning Modes (teacher training by means of the Moodle platform), EFL Curricula Development,

alternative assessment focusing on innovative assessment tools in typical and non-typical education such as e-portfolio implementation.

Alexandra Athanasiou (alexalko@otenet.gr) holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature from the University of Toronto, an M.Ed. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the Hellenic Open University and a PhD in Adult Education from the Hellenic Open University. She works as a teacher of English in Secondary Education and is also an Instructor on the M.Ed. in TEFL offered at the Hellenic Open University, where she teaches the module dealing with the Teaching of English for Specific Purposes. Her research interests include issues pertaining to lifelong learning in Adult Education, corporate training and other forms of professional oriented education, as well as Economy in Education.
