

Strengthening Self-Confidence and Inclusion of Disadvantaged Adults: Competence-Awareness and Metacognitive Skills in Basic Education

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Abstract

In the framework of the project 'BeE - Be(com)ing European' - funded by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme - an guiding concept for basic education courses is developed. Thus the project does not focus on a contentual definition of basic education, as the requirements put on adults nowadays are much too complex and dynamic to be integrated in a finite concept of basic education. Nonetheless questions on what is needed to take part in European societies are discussed and function as general frame of reference. The project rather deals with the fundamental basis of sustainable learning and ways to motivate learners to take part in lifelong learning. When dealing with learners who have already made negative learning experiences, this is particularly important.

The approach of BeE is to focus on the competences learners have gained in their lives – be it in formal learning settings or in everyday life situations. Therefor strategies that help teachers in assessing and in utilizing these competences are developed. The aim is to promote competence based learning – instead of focusing on deficits – and hereby change the student-teacher relationship. An important means of doing this is to integrate learning in the everyday-life contexts of the students. Further BeE develops ways to integrate metacognitive skills and self-regulated learning strategies into basic education courses. Being able to self-regulate a learning process is not only an elementary base for lifelong learning but also promotes autonomy and fosters motivation to learn.

The project consortium consists of eight adult education institutions from seven different European countries. The different partners deal with various target groups and numerous different subject areas. The heterogeneous composition of the project consortium and its varied experience in adult education allows for the development of a multifaceted and innovative approach.

The concept is tested and implemented in differently structured workshops with educational staff. The BeE-concept will, too, be available for the public after the project has finished (November 2014).

1. 'BeE - Be(com)ing European'

'BeE – Be(coming) European' is an European project - funded by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme - which deals with challenges and opportunities of basic education for adults. Important questions that are addressed during the lifetime of the project are among others: How can basic education be defined, which learning and teaching approaches are successful, how can (disadvantaged) learners be motivated to participate in courses and to learn autonomously, which specific challenges are teachers facing in basic education?

BeE aims at finding applicable answers to those issues and is developing a comprehensive concept of basic education. This concept enables a flexible adaptation of course content and teaching / learning strategies to individual conditions: to various target groups and their learning styles, to diverse content areas as well as to the different conditions of educational institutions. BeE promotes innovative and flexible learning settings and teaching methods that comprise formal and informal ways of learning.



This particularly includes the acquisition of metacognitive skills, which are necessary for lifelong learning.

BeE thus stresses the relevance of everyday life issues for learners. The BeE-concept helps to improve basic education courses, particularly by encouraging disadvantaged groups and groups with negative learning experiences. For this aim the project consortium works together with teachers, curriculum developers and other persons working in (basic) education.

The consortium consists of eight educational institutions from North, Central and South Europe that are characterised by a broad variety of subject areas, teaching and learning styles and target groups.

The members of the BeE-consortium are:

- WHL Graduate School of Business and Economics Lahr – Germany
- Archivio della Memoria – Rome / Italy
- CVO Antwerpen – Belgium
- Dachverband der Burgenländischen Frauen-Familien- u. Mädchenberatungsstelle – Austria
- European Learning Center – Ubrique / Spain
- Foundation for Women Entrepreneurs – Hamrun / Malta
- HF & VUC FYN Ringen – Danmark
- Volkshochschule Lingen – Germany

The BeE website: <http://www.becoming-european.eu/>

2. Background of BeE

Being or becoming a European adult implies a lot that every adult should be capable of and which is thus an undertaking for basic education. Basic education in our societies includes cultural, political, economic and technological dimensions in addition to basic literacy and numeracy skills. It refers to a set of specific disciplinary competences and knowledge, but also to general abilities of coping successfully with one's life. This includes the ability to recognize one's always newly emerging needs for learning and the ability to learn autonomously in accordance with these continuous challenges.

A first main objective of BeE was to analyse the inherent tensions of a comprehensive concept of basic education with a European perspective. Comprehensive means that it ought to include cultural, political, economic technological dimensions not only in addition to but also as fields of application for basic literacy or numeracy but particularly for learning competences. Relevant tensions originate from the fact that the requirements for be(com)ing a European in our complex societies are so high and so dynamic that it can hardly be classified as 'basic' education. This includes not only the cognitive and reflective dimension (which things I need to know/learn) but also the motivational (I want to learn more in accordance with the dynamic of society), and the volitional (I do it).

A second main objective was thus the elaboration of a comprehensive concept of basic education. Such a concept cannot be outlined on the content level but on a general competence level, so that it can be applied to different educational contexts, where the different contents come into play.

Such a concept aims at:

- raising awareness for basic education as a necessary prerequisite of an autonomous or self-reliant conduct of adult life,
- fostering self-regulated learning, 'learning to be', embedding learning into the individual's life-world,
- develop key competencies of lifelong learning, particularly learning to learn as well as social and civic competences (active citizenship),
- raising awareness concerning learning resources: helping adults to find pathways to improve their knowledge and competences,
- improving access to adult education, particularly for individuals who have left education without basic qualifications,

- presenting such topics not only in addition to but also as potential fields of application for basic literacy and numeracy skills.

3. Workshop Series

This comprehensive concept of basic education was outlined in form of a workshop series for educational staff. It aims at helping staff making learning sustainable by motivating learners to continuous and autonomous learning. The main focus of this workshop series is a common learning experience by means of merging theoretical input with the experiences and perspectives of the participants. It tries to help educational staff to reflect on and improve educational measures (e.g. course curricula, syllabi, methods) as well as student motivation.

The BeE-workshop-series is divided in seven workshops that deal with four partly interrelated core topics:

- What is basic education – in Europe?
- What is European and what does this mean for basic education?
- Which competences do the learners already have and how can they be used as a starting point for educational measures?
- What is self-regulated learning and how can it be improved?

The first two workshop sessions provide background information for reflection about what is necessary, i.e. basic, to participate in European societies and what defines a European identity, i.e. its common basis.

The following four are relevant in defining educational measures on theoretical basis of competence orientation and self-regulated learning. They deal with the interrelated goals of adult basic education, i.e. on the one hand increasing autonomy by taking into account the identity of the learners, their individual learning background and life worlds, and on the other hand fostering self-regulated learning by focusing on learning abilities and learning related meta-competences. These workshop sessions support the reflection on measures used in class and foster discussions about methods that can support students in gaining a positive attitude towards learning.

Workshop 7 combines the results of all previous workshop sessions and leads to the design of an improved educational measure, i.e. it enables a flexible adaptation of course content and teaching/learning strategies to individual conditions: to various target groups and their learning styles, to diverse content areas. This concept thus stresses the relevance of everyday life issues for learners. It is not necessary to always do the full sequence of workshop sessions. It is possible to choose those sessions that fit to the local requirements and conditions. The provided materials and suggested sequences, interview guidelines as well as discussion questions are to be understood as exemplary. The concrete local sequence of workshop sessions and individual learning processes are to be adapted to the local conditions and objectives.

Though the workshop series is designed to be used within a face-to-face workshop for educational staff, it can also be used by self-learners (i.e. somebody wanting to prepare him/herself for the implementation of a workshop or somebody wanting to acquire some ideas and methods in relation to basic education in a European perspective).

The workshops consist of different 'materials'. All the materials start with an introduction to the respective workshop including an overview of the used material. The materials are introduced with a short description of its objectives as well as suggestions for their usage within a workshop or in an autonomous learning setting. Subsequently, the material to be handed out to the participants of the workshop/course follows. For self-learners this material is the basis for self-reflection and engagement within a topic. The workshops end with guidelines for discussion and reflection, which aim to consolidate the common learning experience. Additional to each workshop session there is a number of recommended readings that are aimed at encouraging deeper understanding about the topic at hand.

The methodology during the workshop is a mix of didactical approaches, which take the situations of the participants as starting points. This will allow participants to gain as much experience as possible. The workshop includes individual, partner and group work, discussions as well as interviews with students. Its focus is on activating and innovative teaching styles which will directly relate to the requirements of the workshop participants.

So the workshop participants will not only be able to promote the development of a comprehensive concept of basic education and participate in an innovative European project; they will gain a deeper understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities which are connected to basic education. Above that, the workshop participants will have the possibility to share experience and enhance the cooperation between experts as well as broaden their pool of teaching methods.

3.1. Competence Orientation

Competence orientation might seem to be only a 'hype'. However in the field of basic education it is the adequate approach. Competences are considered general personal dispositions so that they can be activated in different situations. It boils down to 'being able to x' with 'x' being a rather general action. As far as competences are acquirable this means that developing competences in one field can have an added value in another. This is important because basic education for adults has to be parsimonious in a certain sense. A given course is always limited in time, awareness and motivation, and all kinds of other resources etc. So the learning that takes place in the framework of a given course has to be of maximized use, i.e. it has to be as multi-functional as possible. And this can only be achieved if the learning is transferable and (self-) sustaining.

So at the beginning of the course planning – even or particularly in basic education – should be the analysis of the existing competences of the learners in relation to the target competences of the given course. Course planning should therefore not start with the deduction of some knowledge chunks from a general curriculum which ought to be present at the end. This approach does not make optimal use of the learning time.

Competence orientation implies taking account of a more individual approach on the one hand and a more social or socially embedded on the other. From the individual perspective taking competences as a personal disposition makes teachers and learners aware of informal learning and of learning methods the learners already use. A salient way to discover these (often hidden) competences is by discussing this issue with the students or by a relatively open face-to-face-interview. By the way, such a form of recognition, of looking for the positive, improves learning motivation; it can be a kind of talking cure.

From the social perspective conceiving competences as something which is or has to be socially embedded means to give meaning to the learning process. Activating the social background of learning provides a resource of meaning and thus again of motivation.

The main method trained within two respective workshops is thus a teacher-student-interview focussing positively on previous successful learning experiences in order to motivate further learning.

3.2. Self-Regulated Learning

To learn successfully, it is not only important to be motivated and aware of your own competences, and to know strategies to regulate your own learning process, i.e. it is important to have sufficient metacognition and meta-competences available. The two sessions dealing with self-regulated learning also include a teacher-student-interview. This one thus focuses on learning strategies which among other can be used as starting point, in order to sustainably help students to regulate their own learning.

Self-regulated learning is highly meaningful in the context of basic education for adults. A self-regulated learner can experience learning as meaningful as she is in control of what she is doing. If a learner is actually structuring a learning process by himself, he is more actively involved in his learning process and therefore again more motivated.



Metacognition is at the core of SLR; and this “is recognized as an important predictor of student academic motivation and achievement. This process requires students to independently plan, monitor, and assess their learning. However, few students naturally do this well.” [] Self-regulated learners can even manipulate their learning environments to meet their needs.

Educational measures are thus to be structured in a way that they support and value autonomous learning processes.

A problem, particularly within basic education for adults, can however be that being an effective learner is not always and everywhere socially appreciated: “...how students choose to approach and monitor their learning is usually consistent with their preferred or desired social identity ... Whereas students who believe getting good grades is inappropriate for their social group may disregard effective SRL strategies such as doing homework efficiently ..., students with identities consistent with intellectual curiosity may be more apt to engage in SRL learning.” []

Self-regulated learning implies strategies to structure a learning process as well as metacognitive, resource related, motivational and volitional requirements that make learning possible. And, of course, there are teaching and learning strategies that help internalising these strategies and requirements. The relating workshops introduce these steps to help students become self-regulated learners. The workshop materials provide among others an interview guideline and a tool kit to foster self-regulated learning with specific teaching methods.

References

- [1] Zumbrunn, Z., Tadlock, J. & Roberts, E.D. (2011) Encouraging Self-Regulated Learning in the Classroom. Proceeding of Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium, 7. [[http://www.self-regulation.ca/download/pdf\(2\)/Self%20Regulated%20Learning.pdf](http://www.self-regulation.ca/download/pdf(2)/Self%20Regulated%20Learning.pdf)] [1] *Ibd.*, 18.