

How do adult migrants learn to live in their new country?

Redesigning civic integration education



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1 A position on civic integration

Current civic integration courses are mostly language and knowledge-based and do not take the complex efforts into account that migrants face whilst building a new life in a foreign society.

Since 2002, Vantrood Educational Services is researching and developing methods for psycho-social adult learning, focusing on a double context approach: the receiving society, as well as the adult migrant learner.

In this position paper, we describe the theory-base of principles of this effective pedagogical approach and discuss assumptions of adult learning and civic integration in order to define constructive future directions.

1.1 *The limitations of current courses for linguistic integration of adult migrants*

Language courses for migrants in western countries should be supportive to their efforts to create a meaningful family and working life and targets should be functional and facilitative (Beacco, Little, and Hedges, 2014). However, current civic integration courses focus on language acquisition only and do not empower migrants to live in a new country, deal with tensions or reflect on their cultural identity. Moreover, most countries acknowledge only one level of adequate language proficiency, whereas adults are highly diverse in their learning abilities (LIAM, 3d survey, 2014; Krumm & Plutzar, 2008). Especially low educated and low literate migrants are likely to be penalised for their inability to succeed in civic integration courses (Beacco et al., 2014), which could lead to increased tensions and frustrations and cultural discontinuity (Super & Harkness, 1986).

Contextualisation of language, using examples which are relevant to the learners, and sometimes combining the course with excursions or work, is seen as a method to enhance the language learning process. However, based upon long years of experience and research (Chambers, 2002; Freire, 1994; Nieuwboer and Rood, 2016; Rood, 1997), we claim that goals like social integration and participation are only reached by double context learning, i.e. the context of the receiving country and the context of the learner. We will also discuss the importance of the reintroduction of affective goals like self-confidence and self-efficacy. Notably, children learn to be part of society through a minimum of 16 years of didactic and social exposure, which evidently exceeds language acquisition alone. Governments invest significantly in basic education for their population, but do not acknowledge the basic learning needs of adult first learners.

In this position paper we will illustrate that effective adult migrant learning requires a similar effort, albeit less time consuming, provided that a suitable didactic method is applied. We will also address several obstacles for implementing this method.

2 Principles of adult learning

Basic principles of adult learning include learning about things that matter and learning by exposure to different perspectives. By focusing on what matters to individuals, instead of teaching a predefined and fixed model of culture, learners are encouraged to interact with others to explore their identity and the context of their own cultural group, which already holds different perspectives. Additionally, through encounters with locals and exposure to habits and language of the receiving country, other perspectives will challenge the learning process even more. Students will exchange and acquire ways of coping with cultural tensions and challenges.

One of the results of such a pedagogical method is that learners will not only experience progress in language acquisition, but also in their ability to redefine themselves as individuals, capable of learning and interaction, and confident to take part in society. The students influence the content, speed and chosen activities of the course, while its main goal (namely, integration in a host society) is agreed upon and crucial topics are identified within the group of learners.

Such an approach is not contradictory to language acquisition and active participation, but instead enhances the learning process, especially with first-time adult learners.

2.1 Design principles for migrant learning

Design principles of participatory methods are:

1- Mapping. At the start of a course and following each module, participants are invited to map the topics most pressing and stressful to them.

2-Role model facilitator. A similar-background role model facilitator shows feasible alternatives for perception and behaviour and serves as a cultural broker.

3-Homogeneous groups. Forming a group of learners with similar backgrounds is advantageous. They feel safe to experiment and accept change in the safety of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1968).

4-Multi-sensory, semi-structured curriculum. By using many creative and playful didactic tools, the learning process is fun and leads to many experiences of success and encouragement.

5- Mother-tongue-based dual language approach. Participants are encouraged to effectively express themselves in their native language (L1). At the same time, they are constantly challenged to learn the new target language (L2) in a functional way, mainly listening and speaking.

Good practice

These principles have been successfully implemented in the IDEAL-programme (Nieuwboer and Rood, 2016, www.ideal-participation.eu). Groups of migrant mothers chose topics like health, parenting, effective communication, and taking part in Western society. These topics were used to design a curriculum with conversations, role play, story-telling and many other activating didactic tools. Out-of-the classroom activities are organised as well, like using public transport, a visit to a library, education at a health centre, or talks with teachers at a school.

The participants reported progress in self-confidence, communications skills, and participation. After the programme, participants were able to structure their daily activities, become

involved in school affairs, to visit a doctor without interpreter and to use public transport, visit public facilities and take up voluntary work. Finally, we assessed the language proficiency levels (L2) of the participants. They were reported to easily formulate correct full sentences, whereas others used correct words and created sentences with some minor mistakes. Most learners improved one level in oral communication.

3 Challenging assumptions

Adult learning in Western societies is mostly perceived as voluntary and focuses on language, digital skills and numeracy. Although lifelong learning is in some ways encouraged, this practice is based on the assumption that adults already have completed a minimum of basic education.

However, this is an inadequate assumption in case migrants are low educated and come to live in Europe as adults. Moreover, even educated adults can be low literate, research shows.

Approximately 12% of the Dutch population has low literacy skills, of which two thirds are migrants (Buisman and Houtkoop, 2014). Within the current systems, psycho-social learning for these groups is not facilitated at all and basic education or “bildung” of adults is not acknowledged as the responsibility of the educational system.

Furthermore, civic integration is incorrectly perceived as a one-directional learning process: we tell migrants how this country works, how to behave and, for instance, how to treat women (New York Times, 12-20-2015). This is contrary to pedagogical and andragogical insights on learning processes. Learning processes should be understood as processes of change, and change only takes place in a safe context. Thus, when cultural tensions are discussed in a safe and conducive learning environment, respecting the prior knowledge and beliefs of the learner, taking the double context approach, gradual change becomes feasible and acceptable. A participatory, social constructivist, approach encourages participants to share observations, opinions, doubts, dilemmas, choices and solutions among individuals who are learning to live in a country which is not familiar to them, including topics which matter most and have a considerable impact on daily family life and future generations in the context of society. Effective adult learning programmes take these perspectives of

learners into account and use them to encourage change. Although language teachers do a great job within their mandate, they aim at performative tasks only. They are not trained to encourage reflection, handle emotions or lead discussions on values and morals. In other words, affective tasks of building a new life are ignored and neglected.

Interestingly, participatory methods in adult education were much more common in European societies until the mid-eighties, empowering and emancipating generations (mostly women) to participate in society. However, adult education was not always the responsibility of the educational system, but rather of organisations for social work (Merriam and Brockett, 2007). In order to facilitate the learning process of affective tasks, social workers are much more adequately equipped. Furthermore, social workers with a migrant background can be trained to facilitate the participatory learning process that is needed. Methods for training are already available.

4 Future directions

In order to proceed and improve adult education for migrants, several obstacles need to be addressed and opportunities should be pursued.

Foremost, we recommend that policy development should follow the mission of the Council of Europe, which states that migrants should be supported in their efforts to live in a host country and low educated migrants warrant special attention and care (LIAM Guiding principles, 2015). Unless governments take responsibility for this highly relevant form of adult education, migration will likely have disruptive effects on society as a whole, as cultural tensions increase.

In order to provide effective education, adult learning for migrants should be redefined and redesigned as psycho-social basic education, including language acquisition, instead of language education alone. Such adult education implies support in the development of self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy as parents, and abilities to participate in society. In this paper, we focus on migrant learning, but in fact, all adults could benefit from a (re)introduction of such courses, as we all face challenges in the way we contribute to a healthy modern society of active participants. Such education needs to differentiate between learners, take the needs of the students into account and

contextualise the content of education. Furthermore, these courses should be designed and facilitated by professionals - combining insights from social work, andragogy and education - and evaluated, in order to assess and guarantee their quality.

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