Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. The case of GSAE (General Secretary for Adult Education) in Greece

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Abstract - The participation rates in adult education in Greece are low in comparison with other European countries. Within the framework of this present research an effort has been undertaken in order to evaluate the program of training instructors of adults through distance learning education hosted by the GSAE (General Secretary for Adult Education) and the ICAE (Institute for the Continuing Adult Education) in Greece. Among the most important outcomes of this research was considered to be the positive attitude of the participants concerning the program in general as well as the electronic educational material distributed. Furthermore, the hybrid educational process selected for use by the program was thought to be particularly flexible. As for the program’s negative aspects, the main problems noted were the relatively large distance certain trainees had to cover in order to participate physically during the scheduled meetings, as well as the technical matters arose within the e-learning environment.

Index Terms - Adult Education, Evaluation, Greece, Hybrid Learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

In our days it is admissible that lifelong learning refers to all types of education and includes every kind of learning activity with the ability to be undertaken throughout a person’s lifetime. The emerging theories of how adults learn (as distinct from how children learn) were subsumed into the term ‘andragogy’ by Knowles [12]. The term refers to the principles of adult learning, as a contrast to the term ‘pedagogy’, which describes the principles of child or adolescent learning [14]. Learning can be beneficial to the quality of life and it can encourage the involvement of the individual in society. According to civil texts lifelong learning in referred mainly to activities performed beyond one’s mandatory education and has been connected to the need for constant knowledge updating and new knowledge acquirement [2]. In 1929, a Harvard professor, Alfred North Whitehead, wrote a series of essays warning that traditional methods of higher education, such as lectures and readings, are ineffective in teaching a person what to do, how to do it, and when to do it [3].

The concept of adult education is more restrained than that of lifelong learning [8]. Adult trainees groups main characteristic is that they are non homogeneous in terms of their acquired experience reserves, their personal needs and expectations, their financial and cultural standard, their personality that has already been shaped, their interests, but also in terms of capability and learning manners [1], [12].

Another important notion with particular significance gained over the last years is that of Open and Distance learning which concurs to promoting flexible forms of learning, education, training and instructing adults [4], [9], [18]. Distance education has a long history in contexts where dispersed populations present challenges to traditional classroom-based educational systems [17]. The origins of distance education lie in correspondence education, but nowadays most distance-learning institutions make extensive use of electronic resources, with course materials provided on CD-ROMs and dedicated websites, and tutorial support provided by electronic mail and computer-mediated conferencing [16]. Studies on distance learning within adult education over the last three decades have highlighted not only the benefits, but also the challenges that adult learners face in participating in distance and online education programs [15]. In Open and Distance learning the gap separating adult trainees and their instructors constitutes a key element [7] and therefore the importance of the educational material and its outlining style is stressed in order to facilitate the learning procedure.

Researchers in distance education have also been criticized for their unreflective borrowing of concepts and methods from mainstream educational research [5]. Online education programs have enabled learning opportunities to adults that allow for breaking away from space and time constraints [6]. In order to support distance learning and collaborative work, various Web-based Learning Management Systems (LMSs) have been developed, such as the Web Course Tools (WebCT), the Web Course Homepage System (WebCH), the Blackboard Learning System and the System for Multimedia Integrated Learning (Smile). LMSs have become popular since they incorporate a suite of functionalities addressed to learners, tutors and system administrators. These functionalities are designed, among other services, to create, deliver and manage learning content, track and report on learner activity and progress, enable synchronous and asynchronous collaboration/communication and provide centralized control and administration to tutors and system administrators.
II. THE “DISTANCE LEARNING EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR THE INSTRUCTORS OF ADULTS” PROJECT

Distant learning can take place over the Internet, in which occasion instruction and educational content are delivered via the Internet. Advancements in ICT and the concept of ‘open schooling’ has helped educators respond in unique and creative ways to meet distributed education challenges and provide high quality educational experiences for children around the world [11].

In 2007 launched in Greece a 100 hour programme for the training of the trainers. The training program studied within the framework of the project “Distance Learning Education Program for Instructors of Adults” applies to executives and instructors regardless of their position, their specification, their thematic field nor their didactic subject, who were relevant to the context and the programs effectuated by ICAE (Institute for Continuing Adult Education) supported by GSAE (General Sectary for Adult Education). GSAE of the National Ministry of Education and Religious is the main institution of adult education in Greece. The program’s general goals were making adult education familiar with, training educators who have a variety of knowledge fields on topics like detecting the educational needs of adults, designing courses and producing prototype educational material, evaluating educational programs and trainees, as well as educating adults by using new technologies.

The educational method used for the program realization was some kind of hybrid educational method combining traditional methods of education - face to face method- and the asynchronous e-learning method based on the internet technology [13]. This distance learning asynchronous e-learning method was accomplished through a complete system platform composed by the Learning Management System (LMS). An internationally approved open source platform, called Moodle was the platform used for the asynchronous e-learning method above. The educational material was presented in this platform and was accompanied by multimedia. Part of the educational material was also a DVD, which consisted of interviews of academics as well as microteaching.

The program included 4 modules of a 25 hours length each, joined by classes throughout whole Greece. The first module introduced the participants in notions and themes of the adult education, the characteristics of the adult learners, the role of the trainer, needs and assessment and theories of adult education. The second module focused on the group dynamics, the importance of the therapeutic group, the socially vulnerable groups, the initial meeting and the learning contract. Topics discussed on the third module were the planning and delivery of a course, with themes such as the learning objectives, the techniques and the delivery means. The fourth module concentrated on evaluation, techniques and means and self evaluation. Within every taught module a 5 hour length coordinating educational meeting requiring physical presence was scheduled as well an another 4 hour length coordinating educational meeting requiring physical presence dated at the end of the program. This educational program commenced in November 2007 and had completed by April 2008. Its duration was 100 hours, 76 hours out of which were covered through distance learning and 24 hours through these 5 coordinating meetings with physical presence of the instructor and the trainees.

III. RESEARCH PURPOSE

This present research aimed at investigating the program evaluation process realized within the Region of the island of Crete where a total of 5 classes, each of them being attended, in average, by 30 trainees were held. More specifically, the requirement was to observe the attitude of trainees instructed on topics related to program organizing, instructor adequacy as well as the overall attitude of trainees towards the program they have attended. In addition, an effort was made to examine the data related to the distance learning system used.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The fundamental methodology tools used within the framework of this present research were comprised of: (a) 4 semi-guided interviews addressed to the program participants, (b) an appropriately based, anonymous questionnaire comprised of 2 sections being the outcome of interviews addressed to the program participants. For the quantitative analysis of these research results the statistic methods of statistical inference and descriptive statistics were applied by the use of SPSS - version 13.0 a statistical analysis software application. The questionnaires 1st section was composed of 6 questions mainly related to the participants personal information. The 2nd section included 7 statements of evaluation based on Likert’s 5 degree scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree) related to the educational level - the approach used in presenting this new knowledge - the organizational level -equipment use, classroom facilities- as well as the technological level -platform availability, else of use. In addition 3 open type questions were used in order to investigate trainees’ attitude towards the procedure of their evaluation, the quality of the program’s electronic management system and also in order to record the various obstacles they met throughout their training.

Within the present research, that constitutes a case study, a total of 42 individuals participated, out of which 27 individuals (64.3%) were women and 15 individuals (35.7%) were men. All the participants were active instructors of adults having an average of 4.8 years of educational experience. Regarding the level of studies, the majority of the participants had a higher education degree (19 individuals, 45.2%), 13 of them held a postgraduate degree title (31.0%), 9 of them were technological university graduates (21.4%) while one individual held a doctor’s degree title (2.4%). The sample age varied between 23 and 55 years old - average age 36, standard deviation 6.2 years. The trainees covered a vast spectrum of expertise (literature professors, foreign languages teachers, teaching professionals, physicians etc) while
the sample’s vast majority, 18 adults (42.9%) were information technology instructors.

V. RESEARCH RESULTS

Regarding the questionnaire’s 2nd part research results at first the total scale reliability was checked by using Cronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficient. The coefficient was priced at 0.69 and was thought to be a specifically satisfactory illustration of the questioned answers coherence. The maximum value for every one of the statements listed below was 5 and the minimum value was 1, the maximum value appearing in the total scale is 35 and the minimum value is 7 (Table I).

| Statements of Evaluation | Descriptive Quotient |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
|                          | Average  | Standard Deviation |
| The contribution of the educational material in the acquisition of knowledge. | 4.10     | 0.43               |
| The acquisition and presentation of the digitalized educational material. | 3.71     | 0.54               |
| The quality level of the activities proposed within the educational material. | 3.95     | 0.55               |
| Instructor availability in terms of collaboration and communication. | 4.90     | 0.30               |
| The platform used as the dominant mean of communicating with the instructor. | 4.21     | 0.75               |
| The usefulness of the program’s group meetings. | 4.40     | 0.70               |
| The quality level of the electronic teaching system used. | 4.05     | 0.91               |
| Total Scale              | 29.33    | 2.58               |

By studying the data presented in Table I it is observed that the participants have developed an unconditionally positive attitude towards the program they have attended - Average, A=29.33 - which is a result of the program’s successful design of elements concerning program content, program material, instructive goals, the coherence of teaching units etc. It must be noted that throughout the statements the lowest rate - A=3.71 - was recorded for the statement related to the acquirement and presentation of the digitalized educational material.

This low performance is associated with the participants’ remarks during the open type question regarding the quality of the electronic program management system supported by the Centre of Lifelong Learning through Distance Learning Methods. In detail, the participants pointed out the debility of saving the digital material offered on their computer, something that resulted in users being constantly “online” in order to complete the teaching material. The lack of capability in posting discussion topics through the platform used, the lack of capability in exchanging views with trainees from other classes or other regions, the disability of downloading certain multimedia applications as well as the non interactive use of platform which is limited down to reading certain documents in PDF form or the unproductive observation of the multimedia material.

On the contrary the statement with the highest rate is that related to the instructor’s availability in terms of collaboration and communication, appointing the important role held by the instructor in a hybrid program of training adults.

In Open and Distance Learning, especially, the instructor constitutes a key element for the learning procedure. Time limits and the non frequent contact between trainees and instructors establish adult trainees as more susceptible, when compared to traditional education students, towards the possibility of abandoning the study program at an early stage. Open and Distance learning demands equal communication paths between trainees and instructors [7].

Therefore it appears that the instructor’s presence is highly valued for an important number of trainees [10]. The role of instructors of adults in open and distance learning is to operate as a facilitative factor within the learning procedure and at the same time adopt a consulting part towards adult trainees. The participants when posed the open type question regarding the program evaluation procedure - ex quality of assessment, difficulty level, time frame, marking scheme, deficiencies etc - they commented that often enough the assessment outlines were non comprehensible and the delivery was thought to be not well stated and relatively obscure.

According to trainees the restrain concerning word limits posed on assessments was not appreciated since they estimated they were capable of developing the subject under investigation in less or more words, while the marking scheme on the other hand could be more extent in order to ensure a larger diversification of marks. To conclude with, trainees considered the general frame of the evaluation process as organized and believed that it was not necessary to study a lot in order to respond to the suggested assessment.

The assessment submission time frame was reasonable, considered non stressful and assisted to the understanding and deeper examining of the educational material subject units. Furthermore the participants when questioned about the program weaknesses they denoted the difficulty occurred to many of them by the distance they had to cover in order to attend scheduled meetings, a fact that often was responsible for negative attitudes during these meetings.

A negative comment also incurred about the conditions met during these meetings that concerned material and technical foundations - classroom video and sound means equipment, low speed internet access, insufficient number of computers. Also when asked about the educational material used for the program they commented that although it was understandable texts were rather dense and included many activities. Besides, as noted by several trainees there were many common elements to the corresponding material used for their certification through the EKEPIS (National Accreditation Center for Continuing Vocational Training) in such a degree they were tired of practically studying the same topics and in addition to that they indicated that more tutorial classes should be included.
VI. ADDITIONAL STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Within the framework of supplementary statistical analysis the influence of trainees’ sex through the program evaluation procedure was investigated. By applying the “t” criteria to the independent sample data acquired by the 7 elements total scale presented in the questionnaire’s 2nd part, it was concluded that there is no correlation between the trainees’ attitude towards the program they attended and their gender [t(40)=0.99, n.s].

In order to examine the correlation between trainees’ profession and attitude towards the seminar the sample was divided in two large categories the first included graduates from the exact sciences stream - information technology physics etc - and the other graduates of pure sciences stream - philosophy, foreign languages, mentoring etc. By the use of single path float analysis the outcome extracted was of insignificant value therefore the argument stated is that the trainees’ profession does not influence their attitude towards the instructive program [F(1.40)=2.00, n.s]. Additionally the trainees attitude towards the instructive program did not appear to be influenced by or correlated to the instructors’ demographic characteristics such as their educational level [F(3.38)=1.95, n.s] and their age [F(3.38)=0.24, n.s]. Finally, by using Pearson’s correlation indicator “r” neither the years of teaching experience [r(42)=0.16, n.s] influenced their attitude.

VII. DISCUSSION - FURTHER ANTICIPATIONS

The primary prerequisite required for the effective and qualitative operation within the field of lifelong learning are continuous training and educating instructors of adults [4]. The participation rates in adult education in Greece are low in comparison with other European countries. Within this present research the intention was to investigate trainees’ attitude towards the distance learning program of adult training they attended. Trainees’ views are particularly important primarily because they also used to be active instructors of adults and secondly because the innovative teaching method applied to the program constitutes a template for future training programs.

The outcomes of this research are particularly encouraging. The vast majority of trainees expressed a positive view towards the program while generally their participation in it was evaluated positively. More specifically the trainees expressed a particularly warm reception towards the learning material multimedia presentation, the capability of studying on a desired pace and time frame, and the interaction with other users through the platform by message exchange.

Furthermore, the fact that their attitude is not influenced by their previous experience in instructive programs encourages the effort of effectuating similar programs in the near future involving geographically remote areas or disadvantageous areas and including individuals not necessarily experienced on training adults. This way the program will be established as ideal for training new instructors on educating adults.

However despite the program’s positive elements it is important to report a sequence of problems encountered and related to the limitations met by these kinds of programs. These limitations primarily focus on technical issues raised within the e-learning environment, the lack of appropriate material and technical equipment met on teaching premises used, and the inadequacy of the Adult Training Centers fulfill this need. The distance certain trainees had to cover in order to attend live meetings was thought to be an important disadvantage that substantially discredited the program’s flexibility as well as the character promoted by an instructive program based on the principles of open and distance learning. This element created rather often tension during meetings.

Based on the elements presented on this present research the new perspective offered in applying this program on a larger scale is important. Results are positive and depict that, although considerable issues must be taken into account for such approaches to be efficient, there is a growing interest for the potential learning outcomes of such a method.

Nevertheless, many challenges for the implementation of lifelong learning remain. The motivation of adults learning through distance education is one of the most difficult of situations for the design of effective learning experiences [14]. Training adults alone cannot induce worldwide changes. Well-informed and more knowledgeable citizens are better equipped to take responsible and effective action on their own behalf. However it has the ability to enlighten human beings by giving them the possibility of a better life. Jean Jaurès stated in 1888 that nobody teaches neither what he wants, nor even what he knows or thinks he knows. One teaches only what he is.

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