Chapter 92

Teaching Computers to Adults:
The Case Study of the State Institutes of Further Education in Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

Digital literacy for adults has developed into an important dimension of ICT-related policies worldwide. Although research argues that adults need digital skills, limited evidence has been directed to digital literacy teaching approaches for adults and the associated pedagogy. The study explores which core features of effective adult learning were addressed within the context of digital literacy courses offered by the State Institutes of Further Education (SIFE) in Cyprus. Semi-structured interviews conducted with two groups of Greek-Cypriot adults enrolled in these courses indicate that while certain aspects of adult learning, e.g., optimal climate for learning, other principles related to the consideration of learners' needs and input in the development of learning contracts were limited in effect. Since this can mainly be attributed to the nature of the courses which were designed from top-down and remained openly ECDL exam-oriented with pre-fixed content, repercussions are drawn with regards to alternative paths to adult digital literacy, organized on the basis of learners' expectations, profiles and needs.

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) -often regarded as intergenerational- pervade and transform all sectors of life (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003; Selwyn et al., 2003). Over the last

few years, ICT literacy has developed into the third most important skill -alongside literacy and numeracy- for work force and life in the learning society (DfES, 2003; NIACE, 2005). The concept of the digital divide between people who access technology and those who do not, has developed into a central policy and research issue during the last decade and has given rise to discussions

over exclusion and marginalisation (Morrell et al., 2002; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003; Selwyn, 2004b; Van Dijk, 2006). Apparently, the level of digital skills appears to influence the extent to which citizens take up public and government services (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009); new aspects of digital literacy -including multi-modal forms of expression- impact participation in lifelong learning and distance learning initiatives, consequently impacting equal opportunities in a learning society for all (Forman et al., 2002; Gorard et al., 2003; Mason, 2006).

Educational policy directives and initiatives in most developed countries have articulated actions towards the attainment of digital literacy, without which 'citizens can neither participate fully in society nor acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to live in the 21st century' (European Commission, 2003, p. 3). Digital literacy for adults, in particular, has developed into an important dimension of ICT-related policies and a measure employed to bridge the digital divide, discussed above. With the information society often regarded as the 'ageing society' (Bernard & Phillips, 2000), ICT has become the rhetorical foundation of a 'renaissance' of adult education towards a learning society in the United Kingdom, with other countries adopting similar tacks (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003). This trend over the last few years has given rise to adult computer courses through community education and in-service training programmes (Rogers, 2005). Yet, although research worldwide argues that adults need digital skills (Selwyn, 2004a, 2004b), limited evidence has been directed to digital literacy teaching approaches and the associated pedagogy (Kambouri et al., 2006; Jimoyiannis & Gravani, 2010).

On the grounds that first, there is a research gap in adult learners' experiences with digital literacy encounters and second, that the lifelong learning strategy has turned into a cornerstone for educational policy-making for the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus (MoEC), this study explores how two groups of Greek-Cypriot adults enrolled in digital literacy courses -offered by the State Institutes of Further Education (SIFE)- experienced the courses in terms of adult learning. Despite controversy in the respective literature (Tice, 1997; Sipe, 2001; Haggis, 2002; Kerka, 2002), the notion of adult learning is placed at the core of the present study. Hence, the extent to which core features of effective adult learning are addressed within this context is of particular interest. In this regard, the current study seeks to provide a snapshot of the teaching of digital literacy in the SIFE through the lens of adult learning theory.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: DIGITAL LITERACY AND ADULT LEARNING

Adult education has been a latecomer to the debate on ICT in teaching and learning (Harris & Shelswell, n.d.). In fact, most of the research over ICT and adult learners focuses not on educational institutions or structures but on individual learners (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003). Yet, Webb (2006) argues that little is known about the experiences of learners who participate in ICT-based initiatives, nor about the ways in which such learning influences learners' knowledge construction and sense of social inclusion. Selwyn (2004a) further contends that throughout the existing research on ICT and adult learning, there is little empirical evidence on the motivations underlying adults' adoption of ICT, the nature of this use and the support that older adults draw upon when making use of ICT and the outcomes of adults' ICT use. As Selwyn (2004a) also suggests while commenting on adult learners' use of ICT, alternative means of 'reshaping' ICT to fit better with the lives of adults -rather than the other way around- should be considered. Hence, 'mapping how ICTs [...] fit with the everyday lives of adults is a vital task for the research community' (Selwyn et al., 2006, p. 1).

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