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TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN LIFE LONG LEARNING SYSTEMS

Maria ANDRONIE

Spiru Haret University, 13 Ion Ghica Street, Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: andronie_maria@hotmail.com

Abstract: *Lifelong learning programs are more and more a necessity than an option in today's increasingly dynamic information society. Now, for an employed person to have a successful career, in order to maintain or improve his position, regardless of the industry he is working in, it is not any more enough to finish university studies at a reputable learning institution. Taking into account the increasing rate of the changes we are witnessing, it becomes more and more important for that person to continue the studies after graduating, for the rest of the active career, this being the only reasonable way one can keep up to date with all the technological advances that are taking place.*

Until recently the access to learning resources was limited to those who had the time to attend classical study programs such as those offered by universities, spending considerable time and effort to learn using traditional means, usually in campuses. The rapid changes brought by technology advances came also with advantages that past generations did not benefit from. Today, with the emergence of multimedia and communication technologies, the concept of lifelong learning has become virtually applicable to all those interested in developing their own career. The widespread use of computers and communication technologies has caused the emergence of new ways to provide support and information to those who want to learn from a distance. Now, more than ever before, for a student it is possible to study without being at the same place in the same time with the teacher, having comparable or even better results than those studying in the traditional manner.

Keywords: *e-learning, information technology, multimedia, communication technologies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is a term that refers to the continuous accumulation of knowledge and abilities throughout one person's life, from the early stages (early childhood and primary school) to university and post university studies. Lifelong learning especially refers to continuous learning undertaken by adults after finishing formal school.

In most of the cases lifelong learning for adults is related to their professional career, bringing knowledge and abilities related to the field where they are activating. There are a number of possible motivations for people to continue studies after they finish school, some of them being:

- Improving one's abilities from the professional point of view;
- Gaining abilities in new fields of interest;
- Personal fulfillment.

Lifelong learning undertaken by adults can also be also classified in two main categories:

- Formal learning – usually consist of formal courses, usually organized by education institutions, usually imply some organized resources and costs and offer a certificate;
- Informal learning – in most of the cases is undertaken individually by each person; knowledge can be gained from experience, from other people; the abilities obtained are not quantified and a certificate is not provided.

II. LEARNING STAGES IN A PERSON'S LIFE

Even though through the term “lifelong learning” people usually understand the training programs usually followed by adults that finished the formal studies in traditional learning institutions like schools and universities, this term is much more general including more learning stages that succeed each other in one's life:

- Basic education – usually it takes place in the childhood, in the first years of life and includes things such as good manners and general life habits; this kind of education is usually done directly by parents and close relatives, and even it seems simplistic, it is one of the most important stages in a person's life, influencing everything else that follows; usually at this stage information technology and e-learning techniques are not necessary, because learning is more direct and less formalized; children in this stage more often than not, copy the habits of the parents irrespective to what they are saying, taking them as models in life; after the first years of life basic education isn't any more effective and a child remains with what he accumulated in this period; this stage is often neglected by parents and after years they can be asking themselves what was wrong with the education they gave to their children;
- Formative education – it ranges from primary school to university studies and even some post university studies; in this time children learn how to learn and this kind of studies are best done in class, under the supervision of teachers with experience, especially in the first stages (primary school, secondary school and high school); usually those who attend this kind of learning programs are young people; formative education includes, in the first grades, more general knowledge, in order to allow the children to choose a career; teacher of children bear a more significant responsibility on their future than teachers that address to adults; for the formative education it is possible to use computer technology to assist learning processes as for example the use of simulation software in science classes;
- Additional education – it consists of all the knowledge and abilities a person gains after finishing the formative education; such education can be best done by employing advanced e-learning techniques, sometimes being possible that such courses be studied at distance; the additional education can consist of:
 - Different formal courses that can be followed by adults; such courses can be of different complexity levels and are almost always aimed to bring some specific knowledge and abilities, usually related to the professional career of those who attend them; this is the domain where e-learning technologies are most often applied;
 - Informal learning – is the part of additional education that is carried on individually; informal learning can take place at work or individually; in this case no certificate will be provided to attest he competences and knowledge gained.

Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the stages in a person's education, summarizing the facts previously mentioned.

In the past, usually, while everybody had basic and formative education, few people continued to learn after they graduated university studies. In contrast, today, learning during the active life has become a habit. All the people who want to have a positive evolution from the professional point of view must follow different kinds of courses, according to their career.

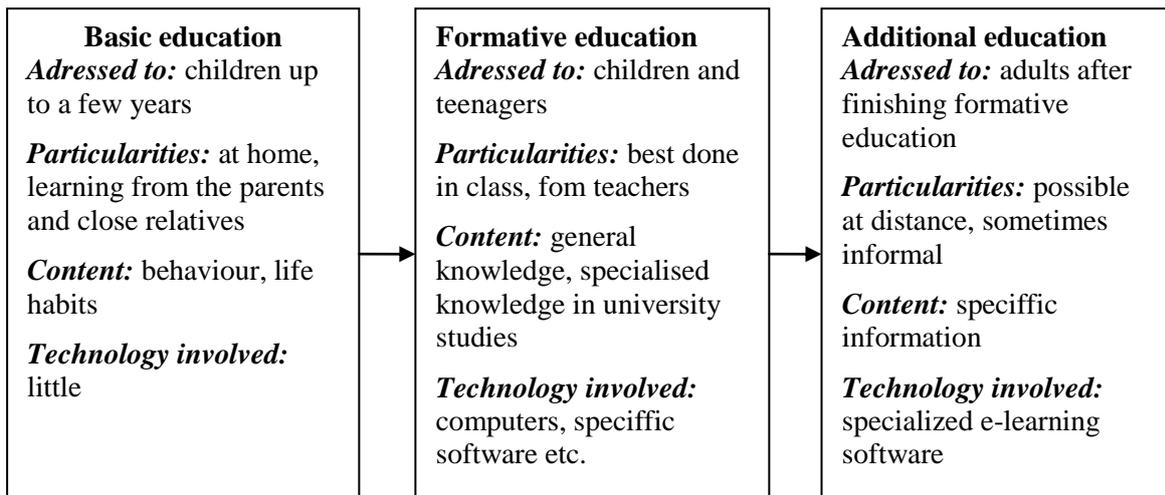


Figure 1. Learning stages in a person’s life

III. E-LEARNING AND DISTANCE LEARNING AS LEARNING METHODS FOR ADULTS

In today’s society, due to the developments in science and technology, it is more important than ever before that an individual keeps pace with all these developments. It would be difficult for a person that has a job and a family to follow in the same time traditional in class learning programs, but, fortunately, they have now the option to study at distance, aided by all the modern e-learning technologies.

Distance learning based on new technologies like computers, multimedia and internet can be even more efficient for adults following lifelong learning programs than traditional in class courses.

The physical presence of the teacher and colleagues is substituted by distance communication technologies, and an adaptation of the content to the particular needs of the student. The evolution of the modern Information Technologies (IT) and of the Internet has revolutionized the traditional learning system, leading to its reorganization and transformation, so that it offers learning opportunities to all the people interested in their professional evolution regardless of the age, sex or geographical area.

The digital infrastructure implemented by the nowadays computerized societies, based on the science of mass communication, allow an easy access to knowledge in every activity domain, from this point of view, the learning and education becoming trans-national and trans-borders.

At present, the new technologies allow full documentation in any study field to every interested person – staying at home - by simply accessing huge virtual libraries that contain courses and didactic materials worked out in electronic format, which can be printed from long distance, anywhere in the world.

The development of the modern learning technologies determined the evolution of the university education in the nowadays society and led to the long distance learning, that represents the most comfortable, the most flexible and the cheapest modality by means of which adult students or students with limited financial resources can study anywhere and under no direct surveillance of the teacher.

Consequently, nowadays, the modern university teaching systems also include long distance learning forms, focused on the needs, aspirations, potential and learning availabilities of certain active students: undergraduates or postgraduates.

However, distance learning based on e-learning technologies cannot be applied in domains like medicine, engineering or arts, where the students have to obtain some competences directly from

their teachers. From this point of view, the individual field of interest of the student is the only limitation to the generalization of distance learning.

The key for the success of the long distance learning method is represented by the adaptation of the teaching, instruction and evaluation methods and, consequently, of the techniques used for the editing, presentation and distribution of the teaching materials and evaluation tests, to the needs and behavioral particularities of the long distance students.

The education supported by the information technology must be focused both on modifying the courses meant for the traditional learning method, in order to use them in the e-Learning method, and on publishing courses by using new techniques and methods, that encourage and stimulate students towards individual study.

IV. LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE ACTUAL EUROPEAN CONTEXT

In the Official Journal of the European Union is presented the view at European level regarding the future of lifelong learning. According to the European Council conclusions on the role of education and training in the implementation of the 'Europe 2020' strategy [1], education is playing a fundamental role in the future development of the European countries. This is so because education is the basis for the competences of the future employees, on its quality depending on a large extent the future of our economy.

According to the previously mentioned document, two are the priorities at the European level in the educational domain [1]:

- To reduce the percentage of children who abandon school early to under 10 percent; this is especially important for the children coming from disadvantaged families like migrants and Roma, by giving them a second chance to education and by creating a more favorable environment for their education;
- To increase the percentage of people aged 30-34 years that follow tertiary or equivalent education to more than 40 percent; it is stated that, while the tertiary education must be made more attractive by modernizing the curricula and adapting the learning programs to the current economic environment, innovation in this domain plays a very important role; this is the area where the potential use of modern technologies is the greatest.

According to the European Council, attaining these two objectives will have positive effects on the employment and economic growth of the future, in the same time reducing poverty.

In order to attain the second objective from the two stated above, besides making the learning programs more attractive, such programs must become more accessible to people that have a career and a family. People must be informed regarding the advantages they will have by following lifelong learning programs and be motivated enough to study in their free time.

In the presented context, technology must offer possibilities to study at home, after work by following specially designed learning modules.

In today's society there have been developed a number of educational programs for adults, offering a great extent of abilities and knowledge according to everyone's particular interests. What it remains is that adults be aware of the knowledge they need and find the appropriate learning programs and follow them.

In seeking to improve one's knowledge and abilities, informal learning (learning from colleagues, at work) must not be neglected. Informal learning can be sometimes the best way to obtain some practical abilities and experience and it is free. The disadvantages in the case of informal learning are that a certificate cannot be provided and it is not easy for everyone to find an appropriate place and environment to gain experience.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In the modern and dynamic society, because of the frequency and amplitude of changes that take place in a person's life, adaptation to new conditions encountered is the main factor contributing to one's success. Lifelong learning is essential to adaptation to new situations and environments, being, more than ever before, a real necessity.

From finishing formal school to retirement a person has to learn continuously, to be prepared for significant changes. Modern e-learning programs based on information and communication technology can be a solution for those seeking to improve their knowledge while having a job and a family. In the same time informal learning gathered from other people and from experience is very important in assuring one's carrier, in the same time contributing to the future economic growth.

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