

## PEER ASSESSMENT IN ADULT EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

**Anžela Jurāne-Brēmane**

Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Latvia

***Abstract.** Adult education as a part of lifelong learning requires the use of modern teaching methods. Peer assessment is topical as it promotes the involvement of participants in the learning process more actively. The research aim is to explore challenges and opportunities of peer assessment in adult education. Structured interviews were used to achieve the aim of the research and to answer the question: what are the challenges and opportunities of peer assessment mentioned by participants of adult continuing education course. Main research results are related to opportunities of experience sharing, better understanding of the topic, but challenges relies to refers to lack of the ability to comment and emotional aspects.*

***Keywords:** adult education; peer assessment.*

### Introduction

Adult education can become a necessity in two cases: changes in employment (change of position, profession or even sector); the need to increase of professional competence. Changes in education take place in different levels and forms, including adult education. However, it must be aware pointed out that adults are the most conservative part of the society, which makes it harder to accept changes (Ivanova, 2016).

Policy makers and national governments starting to see lifelong learning as one of the major strategies for realizing the changes in national and international economic, demographic, social and organizational aspects (Hodgson & Kambouri, 1999). Learning is no longer just an individual's personality development, but it is a development component for society, and the community. Adult education is highlighted in the context of innovation stating that innovation is not just about outcomes, it concerns processes of learning and communication (Desjardins, Lans, & Ederer, 2016). Modern learning process integrates assessment, including self and peer assessment.

It was important to find out how peer assessment is perceived by adults attending courses; whether they see the benefits; maybe there are difficulties that can become challenges. The research aim is to explore challenges and opportunities of peer assessment in adult education. Structured interviews were used to achieve this aim and to answer the question: what are the challenges and

opportunities of peer assessment mentioned by participants of adult continuing education course.

Information on the context of the study: public administration employee, who attended courses in adult continuing education within the framework of a project were invited to participate in the research. The topic of the courses was related to written communication. There were different peer assessment tasks in the lessons. First of all, after small written tasks, discussions took place in pairs or groups on quality of the texts. Secondly, at the end of two lessons, there were practical trainings with more wide text writing, participants read colleagues' texts and evaluated after them according to previously jointly defined criteria. Around 500 participants attended these courses, 25 groups were organised, with about 20 members in each. Training took place two days per group, after the first day participants wrote small feedback papers. They showed notes about peer assessment, both positive and negative. The assumption was made that peer assessment is quite exotic in the adult education.

Regarding the terms of assessment and evaluation - there are many different uses of this term in literature, this publication will be based on the term "assessment", but in some instances evaluation used by author is left.

### **Literature on adult education**

The need for adult education is justified. Adults need to develop and upgrade their generic competences throughout life, and adult education and training may give this opportunity (Gedviliene, 2017). Without knowledge on adult learning the individual's growth may be delayed and society possibilities for advancement are reduced (McGuire, 2011). It is therefore necessary to study adult education.

The term 'Adult learner' is used to describe any person socially accepted as an adult who is participating in a systematic learning process, either formal or non-formal or informal. This process can be self-mentored or corporate-sponsored; in addition, learning may be undertaken as full time or a part time learner, and last, adult learners include diverse groups of people (Kapur, 2015). So adult education is different, specific.

At the turn of the centuries, it was concluded about the lack of one dominant adult learning theory as well as little empirical evidence of exploring and comparison on efficiency of different adult teaching models (Hodgson & Kambouri, 1999). Researchers point out the relationship between theory and practice as the most relevant learning aspect in adult education as well as matching the learning goal with the interests and needs of adults (Hodgson & Kambouri, 1999; Ivanova, 2016). Of course, the aspect of adult learning group diversity still needs to be taken into account - every individual with own

experience, preparedness, beliefs (Hodgson & Kambouri, 1999; Ivanova, 2016). Referring to M. Knowles, in andragogy adults learning is described by the following characteristics: self-directed; actively involved in their learning; maximize prior experiences to absorb new knowledge; learn best in experiential environments; and are influenced by their life factors while in learning process (Dunlap, Dudak, & Konty, 2012).

Researchers have analyzed the characteristics of adult learners. I. Ivanova indicates that adult learners can be divided into three groups, firstly, target-oriented (learning as a necessity), secondly, interested to work and work together (improving capacity in action), thirdly, those for whom learning is a value (interested in the content) (Ivanova, 2016). Researchers describe the adult learner as a self-directed person who is the owner of rich prior experiences, is ready and oriented to learn related to the roles and responsibilities of adult life, and is internally motivated (Hodgson & Kambouri, 1999).

The educational process is also described. Adult education must be oriented to re-evaluate her/his experience (Hodgson & Kambouri, 1999). Adults assess information received in the learning process, and analyses how it can be applied at work. Sometimes ideas arise in this process on how information can be supplemented and improved - this shows a high quality learning process (Ivanova, 2016).

S. Hubackova and I. Semradova stress the role of motivation as an important component on the base of which an adult develops learning activity. Motivation factors of adult education are defined: social motives (leaving routine); professionally relevant reason; participation in community life; outward expectations. This study shows that the strongest motivation factor for adults is awarding of a degree, gaining of a new qualification (Hubackova & Semradova, 2014).

Research on learning avers to the growing recognition of the individuality of learning processes whereas a variety of social and environmental factors are important. As the goal of learning events the preservation of individual particularity and encouraging creativity must be set out (McGuire, 2011). Some researchers point to unanswered questions as to what specific factors of the learning environment contribute to the outcomes as well as discuss and explore quantitatively the effect of core self-evaluation (Diep, Cocquyt, Zhy, Vanwing, & Greef, 2017). Describing learning environment, it should be relevant, respectful, and supportive to best accommodate adult learning. Learner's support systems are primarily in advising, and academic support is important in adult education (Serowick & Cardelle, 2015).

The main evaluation (assessment) strategies used in adult education from teacher-trainers' perspective in order to optimize courses' design and development for adults, are discussed by M. Manolescu, M.L. Tâlván and

A.C. Bozon. They stress the integration of evaluation in the educational process by modern didactic perspective. This is important to highlight that metacognition involves self-awareness of cognitive functioning (Manolescu, Tâlván, & Bozon, 2014). According to M.F. Goulão and R.C. Mendez learners who know how learning occurs have better metacognitive knowledge and learn better (Goulão & Mendez, 2015). Assessment must be linked to metacognitive knowledge.

A.D. Rowe and J. Fitness draw attention to negative emotions (such as sadness, grief, boredom and anger) in the learning process in adult education (Rowe & Fitness, 2018). For adult learners it is difficult to accept that previously acquired knowledge and adopted concepts no longer apply. Changing of knowledge, awareness and skills is a difficult and often painful process (Pastogianni & Koutsoukos, 2018). The impact of emotional experiences on motivation and behavior is discussed.

In regards to different roles of adult educator, it is specified that it is important to become an active contributor on improving the context for adults as lifelong learners by research (Hodgson & Kambouri, 1999; Pastogianni & Koutsoukos, 2018).

### **Literature on peer assessment**

In recent decades peers are considered as potential mediators in the learning process. Peer is someone who has the same learner status (Topping, 2017). In literature, peer assessment is described as fundamentally a social process whose central activity is feedback given to and received from others, with aim to enhance the performance (Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2009). Peer feedback is viewed and analysed from different aspect, for example age, educational level, or level of expertise of peers, but regarding feedback it is any information provided to learners about their performance (Panadero, Jonsson, & Alqassab, 2018).

Researchers talked about peer-assisted learning as an educational method particularly in andragogy that can be explained by adult learners as more heterogeneous (Olaussen, Reddy, Irvine, & Williams, 2016). Peer assessment is possibility of cooperation and provides several advantages to learners in educational frame such as constructing knowledge through interaction as well as sharing this knowledge with other members to achieve the common goals (Kilickaya, 2017). It is characterized as interpersonal and interactional process (Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2009). It is recommended to organize two-way feedback when the assessor will in turn be the assessee, thus this makes it simple to exchange products. Feedback groups can discuss simultaneously, consequently, oral feedback during class will not take much time. Three

necessary elements of the feedback process - verbal explanation, analysis and suggestions for revision - require face-to-face contact (Van der Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006).

Feedback from peers is different by aim: feedback for assessment (pointing) or feedback for collaborative purposes, the latter is more attentive to learning (Panadero, Jonsson, & Alqassab, 2018). K.J. Topping stress the difference between qualitative and quantitative peer assessment (Topping, 2017). Peer feedback primarily is about producing comments that help the document author improve (Elizondo-Garcia, Schunn, & Gallardo, 2019). Peer feedback pushes students to be constructive, focusing on how to improve work of a peer, and not just critique it (Reinholz, 2016). B. Proctor stress that peer assessment can be extremely formative as it is influenced by different personality characteristics, qualities and abilities, group sophistication and communication skill (Proctor, 2008). Peer assessment operating in relation to the products of learning – writing or oral presentations, portfolios, etcetera. Researchers linking it also with other associated skilled behaviours - learning behaviour or wider social behaviour (Topping, 2017). Thus, peer assessment considers both the product of learning, and also the process behaviours which lead to learning (Topping, 2017).

Peer assessment can make learning easier. Peer feedback is articulated in a language that is easier to understand and comes from a non-expert who faces similar challenges (Panadero, Jonsson, & Alqassab, 2018). Discussing the form of feedback (written versus verbal) it is stated that verbal communication can highlight the social aspects of the interaction, but it also requires additional time in lesson. Verbal discussions is an opportunity to practice explaining ideas in a way that other learners can understand and allow learners to receive immediate feedback if their ideas are understood or not (Reinholz, 2016). Often in the learning process peer assessment is reciprocal, and participants will be both assessed and be the assessor (Topping, 2017). Different interpersonal variables in peer assessment are defined: psychological safety, value diversity, Interdependence, and trust (Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2009).

Peer assessment can promote self-assessment (for example, with a clearer understanding of the criteria), and it is important to analyze the connection between these two activities. Observations on flaws in peer writing must be made consistently, then they become a lens that they can later apply to own work (Reinholz, 2016). Peer assessment with constructive feedback can promote the goal awareness, performance awareness and gap closure in the learning process (Reinholz, 2016). Other important aspect of peer assessment is that both assessor and assessee have to think deeply, as well as negotiate a production, their thought processes stimulated, as well as their social skills (Topping, 2017). Learners can increase their own understanding by providing feedback. There is a

reflection on understanding when feedback is provided and received (Chin, 2007). Furthermore, use of feedback from peers can be a promoter of effective students emotions towards their self-regulation of learning. M. Yang and D. Carless describes usage of feedback from peers and tutors in three dimensions: cognitive dimension (self-regulation their own performance), social-affective dimension (facilitating by trust to relationships between participants), and structural dimension (strategy of using a multi-stage assignment) (Yang & Charless, 2013). The option that peer feedback may be less likely to be "correct" than teacher feedback is described in literature (Topping, 2017).

However, it should be concluded that there are almost no studies in the literature on peer assessment in adult education. It also appears in research on adult education literature content analysis in which peer assessment is not even mentioned (Cherrstrom, Robbins, & Bixby, 2017).

## **Methodology**

Structured interviews were selected as a method for obtaining data. Participation in the research was voluntary, participants submitted email address for further communication. Presence interviews or telephone interviews were initially offered, but only email interviews could be realized due to the engagement of public administration employee. Ten interviews were conducted with employees of eight different public administration institution. The gender and age of the respondent was not asked because it is not analyzed in this research aspect.

Six questions were asked to participants: 1. What is your attitude to the need to assess the tasks performed by other colleagues? Why? 2. How was it to assess performance of other in these courses? Why? 3. How was it when your colleagues assessed your work in these courses? Why? 4. Please tell about your past experience in peer assessment - what courses you've visited before! What was this experience, what was your attitude? 5. In your opinion, what benefits could be gained from peer assessment? Why would it be necessary to apply it? 6. In your opinion, what negative features could peer assessment have?

Thematic data analysis was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006), answers were sifted and formulated in statements. Then the statements were grouped according to both basic aspects of the research: challenges and opportunities. Thereby statements were combined into categories that allow to formulate the set of peer assessment challenges and opportunities.

## **Research results**

Explanation of questions creating in short: the last two questions relate directly to the research question, but at the beginning of the interview there was a question about general attitude to the need to assess peer texts; then questions about the experience in these courses, as well as universal previous experience of peer assessment. Statements of opportunities and challenges were expected to be obtained from all questions.

In general, the overall attitude was positive, but some respondents highlighted it as a new experience. It is stressed that it allows you to look at the text from the other side, and it is a very good addition to theory. It was pointed out that it was easier in case then a colleague asks for advice himself and is interested in result.

The next question was about experience in these courses as an assessor. Of course, almost all respondents describe it as an interesting process. It was mentioned that easier to assess others than to hear criticism of themselves. Small technical aspect - difficulty in reading handwriting was mentioned.

The third question was about experience in these courses when being assessed. A diverse gamma of emotion was referred which included excitement, interest, pleasure, fear, disbelief. However, the overall attitude was positive, except for one pessimistic - the respondent was convinced that the texts should be evaluated by the lecturer.

Only four respondents indicated that there had been prior experience with peer assessment in other courses, but in two cases it was related to the assessment of the group's work, not individually. Experience in assessing of the lecturer's work was mentioned.

Next question was related to benefits in peer assessment. Some statements related to organizational aspects, for instance, pairs work combined with small groups; texts are 'live', just created by colleagues not artificially made for the courses. Peer assessment is considered to be a valuable addition to course teaching. It is noted that a new skill has been learned - to look at work from the sidelines.

Last question inquired about negative aspects of peer assessment. For the most part, respondents' answers were very short, related to emotions and objectivity. One of respondent discussed assessment situation - if a colleague himself has asked for an assessment, he or she will be motivated to hear another point of view, including criticism, in order to have a better outcome. Another specific acknowledgment was that unmotivated learners without a desire to do anything and learn can also attended courses.

As indicated above, statements from all questions were grouped in two categories according to both basic aspects of the research: challenges and

opportunities. 37 statements about opportunities were made, and 22 statements about challenges. The concept “opportunities” and “challenges” did not appear in questions to respondents in order to ensure free formulation for attitudes and evaluation of peer assessment process.

37 statements about opportunities were coded and combined into categories that allow to formulate the set of peer assessment (PA) opportunities:

- PA increases awareness of the subject, including that didn't understand or overlooked;
- PA informs whether everyone understands in the same way thus reducing misunderstandings (Goulão & Menedez, 2015);
- PA shows the ability to interpret tasks and solutions differently based on own experience, and different ways of thinking (Kilickaya, 2017);
- others' performance in PA can be an example of improving own work (Reinholz, 2016);
- in PA new knowledge is applied in practice both when carrying out a task and when assessing peer task;
- PA encourages valuable and interesting discussions about task, experience (Panadero, Jonsson, & Alqassab, 2018);
- PA provides a view from the sidelines because it's hard to spot the flaws of own work (Van der Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006);
- PA is an opportunity to learn to listen the objective criticism and to improve communication (Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2009).

The set of peer assessment challenges similarly obtained from statements:

- PA difficulty with unfamiliar people because it's impossible to know how they to take criticism (Rowe & Fitness, 2018); PA is risky for people with low self-esteem (Rowe & Fitness, 2018);
- lack of communication skills (Topping, 2017);
- excitement on how others will assess the work;
- inappropriate PA: too loyal or too harsh criticism, lack of objectivity or lack of knowledge on the specific nature of the sector (Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2009);

It appears that some of the opportunities are also identified as challenges because adult learners have very different skill levels and experience (Hodgson, & Kambouri, 1999; Ivanova, 2016; Pastogianni & Koutsoukos, 2018). These sets of peer assessment characteristics allow conclusions and recommendations to be drawn up.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study is an insight into the current problem in adult education providing empirical justification. The results of the study cannot be generalized

due to a small number of respondents, but this confirms the need for further researches on peer assessment in adult education.

Main research results are related to opportunities of experience sharing, better understanding of the topic, but challenges refers to lack of the ability to comment and emotional aspects. Of course, it is difficult for an educator to influence emotional readiness for assessment or lack of assessment skills. However, it is possible to create a supportive learning environment.

Recommendations for adult educator is to ensure cooperation, engagement and responsibility that is a prerequisite for valuable discussions. To realise it, educators must draw attention to motivation issues at the start of learning process, to base learning on the reflexion of practice and experience, as well as discuss peer assessment process aims and results.

Peer assessment should become an integral part of adult learning. Researches on peer assessment practice needs to be continued.

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