

## FREEDOM IN ADULT EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The paper deals with the term 'freedom' in the education environment. The author's attention is focused on the adult education. He attempts to specify his point of view on the important role of freedom in conjunction with teaching and learning processes. It is shown that the 'freedom' can play a key role in the field of motivation. A few basic possible recommendations are formulated and discussed. A good deal of attention is focused on some open questions formulation in the domain of adult education. The next goal of the paper is to introduce some methods and tools which are based on IT and, from the author's point of view, could shift the educational process to higher level. The author deals with selected methods and tools which he has come across in the European Net-Trainers course. They use modern approaches to the educational process and are suitable for the university environment. They can support the implementation of freedom in adult education. The concrete praxis at the various faculties can differ but experience exchange among various workplaces is very useful. The discussion about this topic can bring valuable ideas for the work of all teachers who are responsible for teaching not only informatics, but many other subjects. Lifelong learning also calls for some new concepts and modification of the approaches used. The text of the paper reflects the possibility of educational process modernization and freedom in education wider implementation. From the author's point of view the topic 'freedom in adult education' may soon become a hot-topic.

### Key Words

Education, Freedom, Information and Communication Technologies, Motivation, Net-Trainers Course, University

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## Introduction

The earliest known written symbol representing the idea of freedom is a Sumerian cuneiform word 'ama-gi' (Freedom in Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, 2008). The English word 'freedom' comes from an Indo-European root that means 'to love'. Freedom can be a philosophical and psychological question, it can be the object of social and political investigation. The paper attempts to discuss the term freedom from the point of view of the information age and the teaching and learning processes. An information society calls for lifelong learning. Members of this society have to be motivated to learn and one of the important sources of this motivation can be the use of some attributes of freedom. The author supposes that there is a lack of works about freedom in education aspects. Some ideas can be found on the web (Freedomofeducation.net, 2008). He would like to focus teachers' and students' attention on this significant topic. His first work oriented on the topic of 'freedom' aspects in education (Hrubý, 2004) was step by step developed into the text of the following chapters.

The author wants to emphasize that the text is oriented on adult education only with no regard to its form. Readers' opinions on described ideas can differ. The text should provoke necessary discussion. The author would particularly like to stress the fact that adult education in an information society environment should be based on modified teachers' approaches and a sensitive 'freedom' aspects implementation. According to the author's point of view, it poses no serious risk. The expectations can be great, but competent teachers and responsible students are assumed.

## Some Aspects of Nowadays Education

Nowadays education differs more and more from the education at the end of 20th century. We are living at a time of a greater and greater implementation of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) into education of children and adults of the all age groups. Lifelong learning becomes a life necessity and a prerequisite for keeping a place at the labour market. Contemporary society is more and more managed by modern technologies. ICT can support teaching and learning processes very positively, but on the other hand, the improper use of technologies can change the teaching and learning processes into a down-trip.

It is possible to see the movement of 'free hands' and the parts of freedom from universities toward the lower levels of the Czech school system, but on the other hand, it is possible to see the increase of the role of various Learning Management Systems (LMSs) in education. LMSs are the very useful tools but they can enforce a very strong supervision of the learning process. The teachers (tutors) often use these features of LMSs without practical reasons. Their aim is to collect the most complex datasets of students' behaviour during their studies. Some students are sometimes displeased with it. They consider it to be as invasion their privacy.

There is a necessity to know the students' point of view, their needs, ideas and capabilities. One of the key aspects in the field of education is the students' opinions exploration and a narrow co-operation with students working groups.

ICT development gives a chance for a so-called customised education. It can be based on the fact that the student is more responsible for his/her optimal individual way selection for the study activities and the study goals fulfilment. Under this

condition the main task of the teacher can be to set up the proper study goals, to recommend the way and to be a partner of the student during the learning process.

### **Freedom in Adult Education**

The term 'freedom in adult education' can be referred to as a study environment in which an individual has the ability to study and to act, to go to his/her study goals, according to his/her own will. There is the ability to study without restraint from the educational institutions, the ability to have access to particular resources. Compulsory study goals exist, enough suitable study materials prepared with respect to the main study styles and the learning process is based much more on self study with ICT support.

It is a fact that the technical level of the contemporary society makes possible to affect the private sphere of the students during their on-line learning. It is the time when the access to information and education itself is based on computer networks and the society has no problem with a large amount of data archiving, rapid, powerful and effective searching. Analytical tools and data mining systems are available. Information society calls for motivated people. Freedom in adult education can support their motivation significantly.

Below are the some examples of the principles of freedom usage in adult education:

- Every member of a society has the right for education in the field of his/her interest.
- Clear rules exist for funding this education and every potential student has enough information for his/her decision making process.
- The society has to offer enough information about the

possibilities and recommendations for education, especially how education can be achieved effectively and what the concrete effects of the education are.

- Every student has the right of his/her own selection of the ways to the education goals.
- There are no mandatory texts, but only recommended texts.
- Students mustn't be forced to use educational methods which are in conflict with their opinions on the effectiveness their time devoted to study and their efforts.
- Educational methods, which are used by a particular student, are his/her private matter and the monitoring of students is not possible without his/her own agreement and written permission.
- The electronic self-tests are available without 'spying' on the students' behaviour and self-tests results.
- The assessment of students is equitable, the cheating is impossible.

### **Some Open Questions in Adult Education**

There is possible to find some contemporary open questions in the field of freedom in adult education. Three of them were chosen at random as the examples.

#### **Software**

Should there be a possibility to choose the optimal software for study goals fulfilment by each individual student?

Possible solution:

In some cases alternative software can be used for some tasks of students. When it is possible the student should have an option

to use software. For example, some students prefer open source software and if there is no special reason, this fact should be accepted by the teacher.

### **Students Working Groups**

Is there a reason to give the student an opportunity to create work groups?

Possible solution:

One of the most important skills is participation in team work. It seems to be a suitable solution to give the students an opportunity to form their working groups that, from their point of view, are optimal. Each student should get known himself/herself and some social activities help him/her to know his/her colleagues.

### **Homework**

What is the right role of homework in adult education? Should it be a recommendation only or should it be obligatory?

Possible solution:

The student should receive a recommendation for his/her self-study after every lesson. This assignment should not be a compulsory study activity. It should be a recommended activity for a student's self-study preparation. In this case the right for individual or group consultation about such homework results in the next lesson should be implemented.

### **The Signs of Freedom in the Net-Trainers Course**

The Net-Trainers course (Vejvodová, 2006) can serve as a good example of the signs of freedom implementation in adult education. The Net-Trainers project has been carried out with the support of the European Commission. It is a concrete output of Leonardo program. Nowadays the Net-Trainers course is running in ten European countries. The pilot Czech version of the Net-Trainers course was finished at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen in November 2006. The author of this text was one of the course pilot version participant.

The technology of the Net-Trainers course is proved competent in Europe and the next propagation in Europe and in other countries is pre-supposed. The conception of a new language version of the course is possible, too. Information about the Net-Trainers course are available (Web pages of European Net-Trainers Association (ENTA) about the Net-Trainers course, 2008), (Web pages of Lifelong learning Institution in Pilsen about Net-Trainers course, 2008). Selected methods and tools mentioned later in chapter 6, could help to modernize contemporary teaching and learning processes at the university environment successfully. Some interesting elements of the course are as follows:

- According to an introductory questionnaire survey the individual study agreement between each student and the tutor is prepared for every student.
- Each student studies each course module according to his/her individual study plan.
- Each student can always use all study materials in the Czech language.

- Each student can access and use study materials in nine languages. So, a comparison of various national approaches to the same topic is possible.
- The tutor is a real partner of the students.
- The tutor leads an open discussion with students.
- The course is supported by suitable communication tools based on ICT for a free communication among all participants of the course.
- Every student has active access to three levels of asynchronous communication (international forum, national main forum, his/her own national group forum).
- Every student has a passive access to all other national group communication forums.
- Every student can fulfil the study activities according his/her own choice of information sources.
- Some study activities are not compulsory.
- There is a possibility to study a module in a foreign language with a foreign tutor and a foreign group of students.
- There are some not compulsory face-to-face sessions with informal discussion about the course.
- Every student can evaluate every module of the course and express his/her opinions or suggestions for the module content and the methods used.

The high quality of the Czech version of the Net-Trainers course was appreciated and positively evaluated by its participants (Hrubý, Coufalíková and Smejkalová Mazálková, 2006).

## **Selected Educational Methods and Tools**

This chapter is divided into seven parts. The author wants to describe some interesting aspects of the European Net-Trainers course in detail.

### **The Individual Study Agreement**

The author of this contribution met the individual study agreement in the Net-Trainers course and found it to be a very good tool for the motivation support. This tool can be used in lifelong learning processes. There is the necessity to pay a good deal of attention to the appropriate content of the individual study agreement between every individual student and his/her teacher (tutor). The individual study agreement should be formulated with respect to the special profile of the student and based on the information gained from the questionnaire survey before starting of the teaching and learning processes. This document should set the rights and duties of all education participants. Stress should be put on communication rules. When education is provided in the distance form the introductory face-to-face session is the best opportunity for the creation of the individual study agreement. It is possible to say that in the Net-Trainers course the individual study agreement helped many participants to pass the course successfully. The full utilization of this tool's potential depends on the social skills of the tutor.

### **Working Group Creation and Usage**

Nowadays, there is an increasing demand for the close cooperation of individuals, their capabilities to work together, and their ability to create useful working groups. The Net-Trainers course participants were also divided into working groups. There were five working groups per 7 people created

since the beginning of the course. Most of participants were from the university environment but some members from state administration and the private sector were also included. The age distribution was from the age of 24 to the age of 65. There were various kinds of university degrees from professors to Ph.D. students of Czech universities.

The Net-Trainers course used the concept of the large diversity of personalities in each working group. This methodology was evaluated by course participants as the best and it can be very inspiring especially for the area of lifelong learning. The working groups of participants of various gender, age, qualifications, skills, and interests were very innovative during tasks solution and this groups structure brought the best results.

It is obvious that team-work skills should be developed, it has to be an important goal of education. Besides fixed working groups temporary working groups can also exist according to the needs of study activities. Temporary working groups can be limited by time or by concrete tasks fulfilment.

### **On-line Study Materials**

The technology base of the Net-Trainers course was the Learning Management System (LMS) 'AllWebSolution'. Every course participant had on-line study materials continually at his/her disposition. Study materials were in the Czech language but the course participants could also use alternative study materials in all other languages of the course. The course consisted of five modules and there was an opportunity given for limited number of the Czech participants to study the third module in other course language in a foreign study group.

From the author's point of view the Net-Trainers course study materials prepared in a few alternative languages can serve as a pattern for the other educational materials production. In

this case a student can learn the content and a foreign language together. This solution has an importance for the Europe integration and the student can compare various national approaches to the same topic.

The Net-Trainers course showed convincingly that on-line study materials should be brief, apposite, links to other sources have to be included. Other sources of information should be divided in compulsory and optional (recommended sources). The very important fact is that on-line study materials can be updated easily, colours and multimedia can help their understanding.

### **Study Activities Planning and Fulfilment**

Every Net-Trainers course participant had his/her own study plan for each module of the course. Every study activity had its date of fulfilment, its deadline. The beginning and the end of the module was set by the tutor but the timeline of study activities of every student depended on his/her real self-evaluation, his/her contemporary level of knowledge, time possibilities and study activities demandingness. Students were forced to overcome difficulties in team work planning and team work outputs production.

This concept of study activities planning seems to be a useful tool for the adult education. It is possible to expect a higher implementation of on-line studies in the future. Especially group study activities fulfilment can form special and social competencies and skills of students in a formal and informal manner. It was shown that individual and team study activities should be implemented in every education smartly.

## **On-line Study Tutoring**

One of the qualities of the Net-Trainers course was the high level of its tutoring. This was very well done by the tutor from the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. The course participant had seven months for the appreciation of this fact and during this rather long time period they could get a general idea about the requirements of good tutor work. Time demands, special and social skills requirements cannot be met by everyone. The tutor can be a decisive factor of motivation, he/she has to be capable to solve possible study problems of students sensitively and he/she has a dominant role in ensuring fruitfulness of on-line education.

## **Tools for Communication Support during Studies**

Three hierarchical levels of the asynchronous communication in the Net-Trainers course were implemented. They were: the international discussion forum, the national Czech discussion forum and the special Czech discussion forum for every Czech working group. The course participants could also use a synchronous communication tool. The LMS 'AllWebSolution' provided the chat. All communication among the course participant was controlled by the means of server located in Greece.

Three levels of asynchronous communication seems to be an optimal solution for multinational on-line education. It would be useful to implement: an international discussion forum for common topics discussion in English or other suitable world language, national forums for communication in national languages of every participating state and working groups discussion forums for every national working group in the national language. Chat at international level can sometimes bring some problems because of various students' different

language competencies. It needs some experience to use chat in foreign language and write briefly and clearly under time pressure.

E-mail communication need not be implemented in LMS, every student can use e-mail by his/her choice. E-mail communication is the optimal tool for sending the results of study activities to tutor and e-mail communication is fully acceptable for all contemporary students.

A very important communication channel is a voice communication. Students can use phone, mobile phone or computer network. It is possible to recommend the use of the Skype software, it is free of charge. In the case of the appropriate equipment ownership, videoconference can also be a suitable solution.

## **The Portfolio as a Study Activities Fulfilment Review**

Every module of the Net-Trainers course required a student's portfolio creation at its end. After the last study activity of the concrete module every student had to create a review of his/her work. Portfolio contains the results of all study activities of the student. Some of them were individual activities, some of them were group activities. Student had to select his/her own part of outputs of the group activity and to add it to his/her portfolio. The final file was sent to the tutor.

In the university environment the portfolio can be used as a useful tool. It can serve in the process of assessment of student's work and especially in the case of great number of students it can help the teachers in their decision process about credits and exams evaluation.

## Conclusion

From the author's and some students' point of view the optimal form of education is blended learning. The needed face-to-face contact between the student and teacher is kept, but the number of face-to-face lessons gradually decreases, and the role of the self-study with the support of ICT is much higher. So, the required freedom in education can be implemented. The elements of freedom in education can support motivation – the key to the successful teaching and learning. The freedom is also close connected with the efficiency and the responsibility in education. The Net-Trainers course belongs to a very good European educational technology. The text of the paper describes seven of the most interesting methods and tools of the course. From the author's point of view they can be very usefully implemented at the university environment and to support the freedom in adult education. The students of the all age groups should be the users of technologies, not the slaves of technologies in education.

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