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Why do people with little formal education not participate in lifelong learning activities? The views of adult educators¹

► **About the authors** ► **Key words**

Adult participation in organized learning activities has been the subject of intensive research since the 1960s. The fact that adults chose to spend otherwise free time on participating in adult education courses used to fascinate researchers. But when lifelong learning was discovered to be a driving force for the economy, participation in learning activities became an adult's obligation, and thus, those who stay away have become interesting. This is especially true for the segment of society that has a low level of formal education and for whom western societies have actively tried to recruit to increase their education.

This paper adds a new point of view to the picture emerging from this field of intensive inquiry by adding the perspective of adult educators – people who have regular interactions with both non-participants and participants, and thus gives a different vantage point than prior research has given.

We present the results of a qualitative study based on small focus group interviews with a total of 22 adult educators from eight lifelong learning centres in Iceland.

Although the study confirms much of what prior inquiries have found, its major findings lie in an area less emphasized in earlier research: The adult educators witness that a large portion of non-participants with lower levels of formal education, express a longstanding desire to further their education but many stay

¹ This paper is built on data gathered by Halla Valgeirsdóttir for her Master's thesis at the University of Iceland and a cooperative project between the master's program for Adult Learning at the University of Iceland and the Education and Training Service Centre (<http://www.frae.is>) in Iceland.

away because of insecurity, distrust in their learning abilities and negative earlier experience of school.

Recent studies, based on surveys or interviews with the target group, have uncovered aspects such as “barriers” to participation, and non-participants’ claims that they find trainings and other organized learning events irrelevant to their needs or situation. Our results indicate that a substantial number of non-participants in Iceland stay away from organized learning because of prior bad experiences and a lack of self-esteem. Our findings should encourage lifelong learning organizations to design and present their offerings in ways that take this insecurity into account.

Hvers vegna tekur fólk með stutta formlega skólagöngu síður þátt í símenntun? Reynsla fullorðinsfræðara

► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Frá því á sjöunda áratug síðustu aldar hafa margir rannsakað þátttöku í fullorðinsfræðslu. Sú staðreynd að fullorðnir nota frítíma sinn til að taka þátt í skipulögðu námi þótti það áhugaverð að hún varð að einu stærsta rannsóknarsviðinu sem sneri að námi fullorðinna. En þegar sú hugmynd að ævinám væri einn af drifkröftum hagkerfisins varð þátttaka í símenntun fljótlega talin skylda hvers vinnandi manns. Þar með urðu þeir sem taka ekki þátt áhugavert rannsóknarefni. Þetta á einkum við um þá hópa samfélagsins sem hafa litla formlega menntun og yfirvöld í vestrænum samfélögum hafa reynt að hvetja til náms á fullorðinsárum.

Þessi grein bætir nýju sjónarhorni við þá mynd sem rannsóknir á þessu sviði hafa dregið upp. Hér er litast um af sjónarhóli fullorðinsfræðara – fólks sem vinnur með og á í reglulegum samskiptum við fólk sem ýmist stundar nám á fullorðinsárum eða lætur það vera. Í greininni birtum við niðurstöður meginlegrar rannsóknar byggðri á rýnihópaviðtölum við samtals 22 fullorðinsfræðara sem starfa við átta símenntunarmiðstöðvar á Íslandi. Rannsóknin staðfestir vissulega margt sem fyrri rannsóknir hafa leitt í ljós en mikilvægustu niðurstöðurnar liggja í þáttum sem hafa ekki áður komið fram á jafn skýran hátt: Viðmælendur okkar hafa orðið þess varir að margir þeirra sem taka síður þátt í skipulagðri fræðslu á fullorðinsárum tjá langvarandi löngun til að menntast en halda sig fjarri námskostum vegna óryggis, vantrausts á eigin námsgetu og neikvæðrar reynslu úr skóla.

Nýlegar rannsóknir byggðar á könnunum og viðtölum við þennan hóp mögulegra nemenda hafa leitt í ljós atriði eins og „hindranir“ og fullyrðingar þeirra, sem taka ekki þátt, í þá veru að námskeið og annað skipulagt nám mæti ekki þörfum þeirra og henti ekki við þeirra aðstæður. Okkar niðurstöður benda til þess að verulegur hluti þeirra sem taka síður þátt í símenntun á Íslandi geri það líka vegna neikvæðrar reynslu af skóla og lakrar sjálfsmýndar. Þessar niðurstöður ættu að hvetja símenntunarmiðstöðvar til að hanna, skipuleggja og kynna tilboð sín með þær í huga og sníða fræðslutilboð að þörfum fólks sem treystir sér illa til að læra í formlegu skólaumhverfi.

Introduction

For years it intrigued researchers that adults do participate in adult education courses: adult learning events both formal and informal, organized and offered by organisations such as schools, colleges, lifelong learning centres and workplaces² (cf. classics such as:

² Courses offered by educational institutions which cater mostly to the adult population are by far the most common form for organized learning events offered to adults, although there is some variety in the form of such offerings. A survey of the literature on participation does not yield a specific definition but in general authors

Cross, 1981; Houle, 1963; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). Recently, however, the focus has shifted and we find more and more learned papers dealing with the question, "*Why do they not participate?*" (cf. Boeren, Nicaise, & Baert, 2010a; Paldanius, 2007; Perez, 2009). This shift of interest is understandable in light of public policy in most European countries and elsewhere, which sees adult education as a method to increase the competitiveness of the economy and raise employment rates.³ However, it is consistently the experience of adult educators and the result of numerous surveys (Jón Torfi Jónasson & Andrea Gerður Dofradóttir, 2007; Jón Torfi Jónasson & Jóhanna Rósa Arnardóttir, 1999; O'Connell, 1999), that people with less formal education participate proportionately less in organized learning activities than people with a higher level of formal education. In spite of increased offerings targeted at people with less formal education, a large proportion of the targeted population still seems to avoid participation.

Participation and non-participation in adult education has thus been intensely studied from various points of view, ranging from large national surveys mapping participation in lifelong learning (e.g. Boeren, 2009) to interviews with people with short formal education at their workplaces (e.g. Paldanius, 2007).

Previous research was built on data gathered from the population in question, participants and non-participants. However the experience of professionals working with people who participated reluctantly, or participated only after being recruited individually and often after some persuasion, indicates that the dominant "frontal attack" method of acquiring data directly from the population in question might have some blind spots. This shortcoming spurred us to tap the perspective of the adult educator.

In this paper we thus offer a point of view that is unusual in the research literature: The point of view of adult educators – people, whose work it is to attract adults to learning offerings and to help them learn. Most accounts we have found are understandably built on data gathered directly from adult populations, participants and non-participants, both through large surveys (Boeren et al., 2010a; Boeren, Nicaise, & Baert, 2010b; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965) and through interviews (Manninen, 2010; Paldanius, 2002, 2007). Our data however came from experienced adult educators who, because of their work, have direct contact with both non-participants and actual participants some of whom could be classified as "former non-participants" because they only recently started participating in adult education, after being non-participants for many years. We found that these educators can offer points of view, and information members of the target group might either choose not to disclose when addressed directly or might not be aware of, themselves.

The questions we seek to answer in this paper are: How do adult educators explain why it seems difficult to attract people with lower educational attainment to organized learning activities? And consequentially, how can adult education institutions address issues gathered from our data in order to attract this target group?

The paper has three main sections. After reviewing recent pertinent research, we present the case for gathering data from this unusual viewpoint. We then present our findings based on interviews with 22 adult educators working in eight lifelong learning centres in Iceland, and discuss them in relation to previous studies. Subsequently we suggest five approaches to attract this target group.

seem to refer to organized courses. In this paper, our interlocutors mean organized formal courses – i.e. which give credit units applicable in the official school system – offered at lifelong learning centres where participants participate voluntarily.

³ For an extensive summary of the development of the research on participation see Rubenson (2011), p. 6.

Pertinent prior research on participation

Participation in adult education can take many forms. The most common form discussed in the literature is probably attendance in formally organized courses, usually offered by an institution or a school catering to adult learners. Such is the case in this study. The adult educators interviewed in this study all work in lifelong learning centres in Iceland, and most of them were involved in the recruiting of new participants to courses aimed at people with short formal education. In this paper our focus is on the narrow aspect of participation in adult learning activities which manifests itself in registering for and attending courses at a formal institution.

Participation in adult education has been a field of intensive research for at least the last 50 years. Johnstone and Riveras' 1965 US national survey is often taken as an important milestone, and interestingly, recent surveys generally support their major findings (see below as well as Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). When trying to come to grips with questions on participation in adult education, reports from large surveys can provide useful general information. Some surveys cover national populations (Jón Torfi Jónasson & Andrea Gerður Dofradóttir, 2009; Jón Torfi Jónasson & Jóhanna Rósa Arnardóttir, 1999, 2001; K Rubenson, 2001), whereas others cover whole continents (Eurostat, n.d.; O'Connell, 1999). Other researchers delve deeper by interviewing small groups of adults who have some common trait (e.g. Illeris, 2006; Manninen, 2010; Perez, 2009). However, in broad terms, knowledge and understanding of the issue of participation reflected in the literature has not changed much. The basic traits that research has revealed remain constant, with details about non-participation becoming somewhat clearer in recent studies.

This consistency over time can easily be shown by comparing the results of an international survey with a recent, local one: Connells' (1999) international comparison shows results similar to earlier accounts, such as Cross (1981). These studies both indicate that people who are less likely to participate in organized learning activities:

- are unemployed and / or economically inactive
- have short formal education
- work in small companies
- are older

Similar results are evident in a recent review of work-market indicators from Iceland:

- Less than a third of the unemployed in Iceland, or those who are economically inactive, participated in organized learning activities, while about half of those who were economically active did.
- One third of Icelanders who had finished only compulsory school education took part in adult education while two thirds of the people with university degrees did.
- Half the people working in Icelandic companies with fewer than 50 employees participated in continuing education activities, while roughly two thirds of those working in bigger companies did.
- Older people were less likely to participate than the young (Jón Torfi Jónasson & Andrea Gerður Dofradóttir, 2009).

The fact that patterns of participation in adult education seem rather constant through time can be frustrating (cf. Crowther, 2000), especially in view of heavy investment in projects aimed at attracting new learners from the segments of society that traditionally participate the least. However, recent additions to the discussion deepen our understanding. Some of them have a bearing on our findings and add an interesting dimension to our discussion.

Intention

Boeren, Nicaise and Baert (2010) introduced an interesting variable into the discussion about non-participation, namely “intention”. They distinguished between non-participation with and without the intention to participate. This goes contrary to earlier research where the discussion is bipolar: participants vs. non-participants. Moreover, many researchers have consistently searched for barriers to participation, with the underlying assumption that if people did not participate, they were somehow hindered in doing so. This logic is quite evident in Cross’s classical book *Adults as Learners* (1981). It seems to us that by distinguishing between non-participation where people have no intention of participating and non-participation where people do intend to participate, we can more fruitfully apply the model of barriers to participation, thus presenting a more differentiated picture to analyse.

Reluctance and indifference

On a par with earlier criticism of a simplistic application of a “barrier model” (cf. Aslanian, Brickell, & Ullman, 1980), Paldanius (2007) suggests some people simply do not want to participate. In his data, the issue is not barriers but rather a reluctance to participate or indifference towards organized learning activities. Paldanius’ analysis uncovers a reluctance to participate in adult learning activities because participating in courses does not fit with some of his interviewees’ understanding of adult life. Similar results can be found in Manninen’s research (Manninen, 2004, 2010).

New criticism on the discourse

Finally, it should be evident from the three examples above (Boeren et. al (2010) on intention, Paldanius (2009) on reluctance and Manninen (2004 and 2008) on indifference) that some recent research finds issue with the mainstream discourse on participation, especially with overly simplistic views towards continuing education and lifelong learning, which appear in some policy documents. Crowther (2000) summarizes of the dominant discourse on participation in a striking way: Education is good; therefore participation in educational activities is good for you. And if people do not participate, something must be hindering them. We can call these hindrances “barriers”. Methods are needed to eliminate them. Governments and social partners advocate learning as medicine for many ills, and institutes charged with serving these target groups offer them “more of the same” – more traditional courses – but very often the people targeted do not “take their medicine”. Crowther (2000) suggests a thorough critique of the dominant discourse.

Why is the educator’s point of view interesting?

As mentioned above, prior research on participation relied heavily on asking people about their own participation in education through surveys (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Jón Torfi Jónasson & Andrea Gerður Dofradóttir, 2009). More recently, large scale surveys initiated and conducted by national and supranational institutions (cf. NIACE, 2015; Statistics Iceland, 2015; Eurostat, 2015; and OECD, 2015), as well as interviews with smaller groups of adults (cf. Manninen, 2010; Paldanius, 2007). Through these methods and informants many useful aspects of the question have been uncovered. However, in spite of methodological rigour, research based on the point of view of the participants themselves – or non-participants – can have its blind spots. Well-known psycho-social effects, such as subjects answering to please the interviewer, can bias the outcomes. Also, we cannot be sure that people mention all reasons for their choices when answering questionnaires or interviewers. Some might for example be reluctant to mention motives they are not proud of, while others may be unaware of their own motives, actions or inaction. Thus, research that relies only on information from the population being studied can lack some useful perspectives, especially when dealing with delicate issues. There-

fore we found that the views of highly qualified people working in direct contact with the population being studied could bring a new and fresh perspective to the discussion.

Of course, it is to be expected that if prior research has managed to reflect an accurate picture of the field of study, there should be a great overlap in the findings. However, the educators' knowledge and understanding of the field and of their clients should allow them unique insights on our question.

Morover, in sync with Boren et al's (2010) plea for an integrated model to explain participation in education, we hoped that by tapping into the experiences of adult educators we would gather information which could help give researchers and practitioners a more detailed picture of why some people are frequently distant from educational offerings especially aimed at them.

Research method

Twenty-two adult educators, 17 women and 5 men who work in 8 of 10 lifelong learning centres in Iceland were interviewed during the period of February – May 2010, using semi structured interview techniques. Seven interviews were conducted with two to five participants each time. Representatives from the other two centres were unable to meet with the interviewer. Although we found it preferable to have voices from all the centres, we concluded that it was acceptable to interview practitioners from only 8 out of 10 centres, in view of the fact that very little new information was added in the last interviews.

The adult educators interviewed for this study had first-hand contacts with their target group: people with short, formal educational backgrounds. Their contact was through individual interviews, where the educators initiated the interviews, often at the target group's workplaces. Their views are also built on contacts over longer periods of time, especially when they managed to recruit people from the target group as new learners to suitable programmes. Having gained the trust of these adult learners, the educators usually learned more about the participants' prior reluctance to participate, and what got them to change their minds and participate.

We chose to use interviews in order to be able to ask for explanations and to probe when answers were ambiguous or we thought it would be beneficial to "dig deeper". We chose group interviews to create conversations containing many angles, with the hope that when the educators listened to their colleagues speak of their experiences they could call forth more memories and produce more ideas, and thus give us a fuller picture of their experiences (cf. Halkier, 2002; Morgan, 1997).

The educators who participated in the group interviews are administrators, teachers and study and career counsellors who have daily contact with both participants and non-participants. The counsellors have all participated in a national project where they visit workplaces and take individual counselling interviews with workers on location and guide them – when relevant – towards appropriate learning activities, and thus have regular contacts with non-participants. (Nordic network for adult learning (NVL), 2011). In addition, since 2009, they have also been counselling unemployed people who are now obliged to visit a study career counsellor in order to receive benefits. The administrators and the teachers are all active in the recruitment of new learners and thus also have contact with non-participants, as well as new participants who would not have participated had they not been approached individually. Their experience is thus built on contacts with non-participants and new or potential participants, some of whom have not participated in organized learning for a long time.

The semi-structured focus group interviews were all recorded, transcribed, and coded before the next interview was taken. The results from the first interview thus influenced the interview protocol for the next interview and so on. Finally, all interviews and interview notes were analyzed for thematic content. Five of the emerging themes will be discussed below.

Results and discussion

The questions we seek to answer with this study are: How do adult educators explain why it seems difficult to attract people with lower educational attainment to organized learning activities? And consequentially, how can adult education institutions address issues gathered from our data in order to attract this target group? The first question is answered in this section, under five subheadings, indicating five major themes gleaned from our interviews. The second question will be answered in section 5, built on our analysis of these results.

Real interest

The educators interviewed indicated that when they visit workplaces in order to offer and initiate talks on possibilities for learning and development they observe a real interest in learning more and in developing oneself, especially from people who have short, formal education. The people who were approached in their workplaces by study and career counsellors very often expressed interest in taking a course, or to start studying again – often to finish courses started years ago – but they also mentioned barriers which hindered them from participating. Some of them overcame these barriers and others did not.

Sara: *“The desire to learn is simmering and has been like that maybe for a long time.”*

Rosa: *“I don’t want to generalize [too much] but nearly... everyone is interested in educating himself and learning something, although that does not mean they are all interested in university or full-time study, but the desire to educate oneself and learn something new is always there, just under the surface.”*

Barriers to learning

As mentioned above, a recurring theme in the interviews are barriers to participation. The barriers most often mentioned by the educators could be classified as “dispositional barriers” (Cross, 1981, p. 89), where attitudes towards oneself as a learner and one’s abilities to learn hinder people in participating. Åsta said, *“People don’t participate because they think that they will not manage.”* Helga adds: *“...this is one of the barriers... just to see oneself in a new role”*. The educators were unanimous in their experience that many of the people who had not participated and were reluctant when they contacted them had self-images of non-learners. Many of them seemed to believe they could not learn or finish a learning programme. Sara said, *“As long as their [self confidence] is not ok people do not take off and participate, they don’t dare”*. Moreover it seemed that they could not imagine themselves in the situation of a learner: Heiða said, *“Maybe you see yourself in a role which you have allways had prejudices against, which is a certain barrier.”*

Helga finds study and career counselling to be a very useful method to contact people and to guide them further: *“... just to get them to believe that they can do this like anybody else.”* Here we can see in action the relevance of recommendations published in earlier research in this area, such as Illeris’ (2006) recommendation to support weaker learners with adequate counselling.

Bad experience of school

Bad experience from school does not get very much mention in earlier research results. However this issue ranks high among the reasons given by the educators interviewed. Prior bad school experience can be a root of low self esteem, but also of resentment or indifference as is discussed in various papers on the theme (e.g., Bolder et al., 1994; Paldanius, 2007). In many cases, the educators tell us that their clients relate bad experience from school, which influences their intentions to participate in adult education. *“There are many who ... have bad memories from school and are afraid of taking this step,”* says Rosa.

Ásta explains that the main reason people do not participate in adult education is *“difficulties associated with traumatic emotions from school: Bullying, learning difficulties ... bad experiences of teachers, these are things these people are dealing with.”* She elaborates with an anecdote about a man who was told by his teacher in secondary school that he was so stupid that the best thing to do with him was to keep him at sea. Messages like these seem to haunt many of the people we are studying and understandably keep some of them away from organized learning.

Heiða said, *“I think this group, which has the least education, a large proportion of them naturally has [or] has had to deal with reading problems, dyslexia or such, and this has caused their bad experience, keeping them away from school.”* Our data thus suggests that a number of potential participants for programmes aimed at people with lower qualifications stay away because of prior traumatic experiences in the school system. This has been corroborated in studies based on interviews with people from the target group (cf. Rakel Steinvör Hallgrímsdóttir, 2008; Sólveig R. Kristinsdóttir, 2013) where interviewees indicate that only after much encouragement did they decide to participate, and some only stayed on because they experienced respect and support.

The educators also express the view that various learning difficulties can have contributed to feelings of inadequacy and thus create either an animosity towards schooling institutions in general, or a self-image of someone who cannot learn. With such a background, they find it not surprising that both the people they talked to and did not register for courses and some of those who did, have in the past avoided organized learning.

Finally the educators relate that they often experience that people they managed to recruit to their courses were literally shaking nervously when they arrive on the first day of courses. The educators tend to interpret this as fear of the formal learning situation, sometimes connected to earlier failures and negative experiences in school. Sóley elaborated, *“I think [however] that when the people have arrived and have started to learn, they realize that they can learn. And you know that they are experiencing such a victory, and such joy, just when they have stepped over that threshold.”*

Low self esteem

From the educators' point of view, low self-esteem seems to lie at the heart of why people with little formal education participate less frequently in organized learning activities than others. This aspect, understandably, does not receive the same emphasis when speaking to or surveying non-participants themselves. However it can be helpful for educators to bear it in mind.

It is quite evident from the interviews with the adult educators that, for a large proportion of the adults they deal with (for example people they encounter in one-on-one recruiting sessions in workplaces), low self-esteem seems to keep them away from participating in

organized learning. Their belief that they do not have the ability to learn or will not be able to complete the courses, keeps them from responding to offers to participate in courses of interest to them.

Ásta: *"[People] do not participate because they do not believe that they are capable of completing [the course]."*

Sara: *"When [self-esteem] is not ok, people do not come. They don't dare."*

It is thus evident that many of those who participate in courses especially designed for people who have learning difficulties or lack study skills, seem to need a lot of encouragement and personal support. Some of them need to be told repeatedly that they can learn and that they can finish the task at hand. The counsellors add that these learners usually also need to be given clear paths they can take to further their knowledge and skills. Helga stressed that study counselling was very important in this context, "...just to get them to believe that they can do this, just like everybody else". She adds, "... it is very important for us to be able to support these people and to convince them that they can learn."

The formal school system

Finally, the educators reflect on the general effect the formal school system has on participation in adult education. As mentioned above, many of those who do not participate in adult education courses or who do so only after being recruited individually by study and career counsellors, have kept away from situations which remind them of school because of earlier bad experiences. As we saw above, the adult educators have ample examples of people they have been in contact with who feel they have been treated badly in school often in connection with some learning difficulties. Some of these people later learned that they suffered from learning disorders and would have been able to study given appropriate support.

A large proportion of the (former) non-participants contacted by the lifelong learning centres thus tell stories of how school, as a system, marginalized people who did not manage to flow effortlessly with the stream. These peoples' stories indicate that pupils who had difficulties with reading or concentrating and who preferred practical projects to abstract and academic ones were in danger of dropping out of school. Therefore many of them seem to foster negative feelings and attitudes towards school and even to organized learning.

Implications for practice

A major concern for the field of adult education has been to offer adults with little formal education opportunities to raise their level of education. The rationale behind official interest in adult education is the idea that more education can benefit this segment of society in many ways (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015) and can benefit society as a whole, too. However, as we have shown above, studies on participation have throughout the last 50 years consistently shown that in general the same groups of people participate in educational opportunities offered both through official channels as well as others. Moreover, research showing that people with less formal studies participate less in adult education than others seems to have spurred policies, in many western societies, targeting this group with offers for more education. But the numbers indicate that such offerings do not seem to change the picture. People with little formal education still participate less than those with more formal education (cf. discussion in section 2, above).

The educators interviewed, who are all charged with the job of attracting learners to their programmes, have perhaps not given us a radically new perspective on the question of non-participation, but they see non-participants' inaction from another angle. What emerges from the interviews is that many people do not participate in organized learning activities because of various feelings of insecurity towards learning, training and the schooling situation. This finding is not very prominent in earlier research, which gathers data directly from the target group but could have a strong bearing on how adult education is organized.

Based on our findings we bring five suggestions for practice, which could address some of the issues raised by the educators we interviewed.

“Go get them!”

Probably the most successful method already used by the Icelandic lifelong learning centres to recruit new learners has been to send career and study counsellors out to workplaces to offer individual counselling on learning possibilities. Sóley explains: *“Concerning the issue of attracting learners, then – I think the contracts on study and career counselling have totally changed the landscape.”* Sóley is here referring to a contract the lifelong learning centres have with the state to offer study counselling in the workplace. It is well known that a “one-on-one” method tends to be the most effective way to mobilize people. This has become very evident in this nationwide project (Nordic network for adult learning (NVL), 2011). It is evident from our data that many non-participants seem to have an aversion to educational institutions based on either a lack of knowledge about opportunities, or negative prior experience. Their aversion should lead institutions to offer learning opportunities to this group, using all marketing methods available to them in order to attract the learners they serve, and personal contact seems to be one of the most effective ones.

Lower the barriers

Our results show that attitudes to organized learning and especially towards oneself as a learner seem to deter possible participants from attending adult education. In the literature this has been labelled as “dispositional barriers” (Cross, 1981, p. 89). A reaction to this could be marked as lowering barriers. Our study found that many of the people who were contacted by the adult educators interviewed indicated a real interest in learning, but various manifestations of this kind of barrier kept them away. This result is at odds with much earlier research on non-participation (see for example our discussion above). In many cases earlier research reveals a total lack of interest among non-participants interviewed (e.g.: Bolder, Hendrich, Nowak, & Reimar, 1994; Paldanius, 2007). Unlike the majority of non-participants in other countries who lack interest, the Icelandic non-participants' interest in learning could be an indicator of strong social pressure to learn or to get an education. This pressure was exemplified in Svava Guðrún Sigurðardóttir's (2010) interviews with participants and non-participants. The motivational pair, interest / disinterest, that the educators experience in their work, ties in to Boeren et al.'s (2010a) concept of “intention”, and here we will probably find that certain aspects of the “barrier model” can be of use. Where there is real interest in participating, eliminating real or experienced barriers could increase participation. Whereas in cases where there is no intent, eliminating barriers would have no effect at all. Thus exploring these barriers and finding ways to lowering them should be part of an institutions toolbox. This would include ways of making an organization offering adult education look and “feel” different from school. Again individual interviews with potential participants have also been shown to be helpful. Moreover encouraging participants to recruit peers might be a viable path as well as finding ways to get the message across that in spite of prior negative experiences, many have benefited from participating in adult education.

Experiment with learning / teaching forms and content

It is evident from our findings, as well as from other research on participation, that a classical classroom course is not the best or preferred way to learn for many people. Our results include evidence of traumatic memories from former school experience keeping people away from organized learning. Prior research indicates that some working class people, for example, do not see participating in classroom learning as something an adult does (Paldanius, 2007), others do not see in-house training as the place to learn (Manninen, 2010). One might thus wonder why educational institutions consistently offer the same or similar kinds of offerings: classroom teaching, in school buildings based on teacher input and participant reactions? These institutions are generally paid with community funds to initiate and support learning among this group of people and thus have the responsibility to create learning opportunities that really suit the target group. If people in this target group feel they learn best for example in the workplace, it may be preferable to find ways to help them learn more and in greater depth at work, perhaps starting there and progressing to the classroom when the learners are ready to do so. Many like to learn from practical real-life projects, learning on the job through tasks and problems they need to solve etc.. Organized learning opportunities need to be built around and into daily practical activities. There are ample theoretical models to build such a practice on (cf. Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). A well known practical example is so called “learning-stations” (German: Lernstationen) (Dehnbostel, 2008) where workers enter special practice stations, on the assembly floor, where they take time to analyse their practice and develop it. One argument, among many others, for the development of such methods and practices, where learning finds place at the place of work, is to bring learning opportunities to workers who otherwise do not want to sit at desks far away from the situations they are learning about.

Give attention to individuals

We have seen that according to the educators’ experience, some of the people with short formal education have an injured self image, at least when it comes to learning. It thus seems sensible to plan learning activities for this target group (at least) in such a way that attention to individuals is paramount. When Haukur described the difference between a classical upper secondary school and a lifelong learning centre he said, “...*traditional schools will say ‘come who will... and leave those who will – it doesn’t concern us’ ... and I would say: Everyone who goes to one of these schools has to be cut from the same cloth, but here, we greet every individual.*”

Sóley added that the lifelong learning centres start with the individual and adjust the learning to the learner’s personal situation and needs. Very often a new participant will start off with an interview with a study and career counsellor, and built on that interview the individual will decide whether a course at the centre will be of use for him/her. Sometimes it is difficult to find a suitable path for each individual... “*But that is our role,*” says Bjarni. Participants often participate in courses with others but individuals in the same course can participate in the course in different ways, with different aims. Sóley says, “*Teaching and learning materials can be adjusted to each learner, and then they get appropriate support and encouragement as they need. ... I think this is something which characterises the learning centres,*” she adds. There are many ways to address individual needs, but it seems clear from our interviews with these educators, that tending to individual needs is of paramount importance for adults, and especially the target group in question and should thus be part of institutional policy in design and marketing of learning opportunities.

Create an inclusive group

It is a well documented fact that adult learners in general arriving to participate in a new course feel insecure and that this insecurity stalls learning (Geißler, 2005). This insecurity, as we have seen above is even more evident with people who are new to adult education and might even have traumatic experiences of school. It follows that in order to attract and hold on to this group of new learners an educational institution needs to find ways to help the learners feel at ease as soon as possible.

Haukur said, “... if we manage to start a new group, we try to create a good inclusive group feeling... it is a key element for success that we manage to create a cohesive group... this way we manage to retain the participants and they don't give up. People don't want to let the others down by quitting... [when the going gets tough] people clap you on the back and tell you that you will manage. This is a key issue, especially for this group, where many [participants] have broken self-images.”

It is definitely not a *new* idea that it is useful to foster inclusion in groups of adult learners, Rogers (1994) for example stressed and theorized the importance of a safe and supportive environment to foster learning, and Wlodkowski (2008) emphasized inclusive learning environments. One might even argue that fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments is a central principle of adult education – which seems to need to be emphasized regularly. Inclusive and supportive learning environments seem more like a strategy to motivate and retain participants, but as stated above such strategies should also be considered marketing or recruitment strategies, because the design of an educational offering is integral to its marketing.

Conclusion

"I think it all boils down to one common thread: Low self-esteem," said Helga an Icelandic adult educator working in one of the 10 lifelong learning centres in the country. This statement summarizes the reasoning 22 educators gave when trying to explain why people with little formal education, tend to participate less in adult education than people with more formal education. The educators interviewed mention several reasons the non-participants whom they have been in contact with do not participate. They mentioned issues connected to low self-esteem, distrust in themselves as learners, negative images and their own experience of school and the school system.

It is serious when a system which is seen by many in western and Nordic countries as a social equalizer, and which should give equal opportunities to all, seems rather to widen social gaps, and marginalize people who learn in other ways than the majority. It must be concluded that these educators see society and the school system as being instrumental in creating a group of people who refrain from organized learning in adulthood and thus do not benefit from the ways society chooses to support lifelong learning.

However, institutions that offer learning opportunities for this target group have experienced success through measures such as sending counsellors to workplaces and offering courses aimed at the target group, recruiting participants individually and building a support net around them. There are still opportunities to do even better, especially in view of Icelandic and pan-European goals for raising the educational level in society at large This could for example be done by designing learning offerings especially tailored to the needs of the target group, which would take place in environments that do not remind participants of schools. These would contain activities which make sense to working people who like to *do* things, solve problems and create solutions rather than listen to abstract explanations, take in presentations and sit around desks and talk. Such

practices could in turn change the image institutions for learning have in the eyes of potential participants.

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Key words

adult education – participation – non-participation

Um höfunda

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