

Transforming adult learners' experience in corporate context: conceptual paradoxes and pragmatic conclusions

Mikhail Klarin^{1,*}

¹ISED RAE, Laboratory for General Theory of Education (Didactics), 105062, Moscow, Russia

Abstract. The article presents changes in innovative vs. conventional adult education practices including: goal setting, character of the learner, nature of education, the nature of sources in the educational process, nature of evaluation, social (micro-social) role of education. The author explores innovative learning in corporate context, and introduces several new approaches to adult education. (1) The concept of objectively new experience in educational process, when no 'right answer' is known. (2) The idea of collective learner. (3) The idea of transformative education in the context of corporate organizational learning, and (5) its general phases: adopting-adapting-transforming-transferring. (6) Paradoxes of adult education that do not fit the traditional educationalist's thinking. The paradoxes are explored as cognitive gaps, leading to insights about the nature of adult education, and pragmatic shifts in transforming individual and collective experience

1. Introduction.

Adult Learning and Adult Education

In present text the author looks at *learning* as act or process of acquiring new, or modifying and reinforcing, existing experience, including knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, or preferences. Education is considered as a deliberate process aimed at facilitating learning. Features of adult and continuing education are defined by specific features of adults as learners. Essentially meaningful part of adult learning is based on personal experiences which have innovative, transformative nature.

2. Adult Learning as Transformation of Experience.

Adult learning as a means of restructuring experience implies genuine transformations or shifts in individual or collective meanings. Transformation of experience and meanings correlate with situations of change and/or crisis in individual or collective learners' lives or modes of activity. Thus, genuine learning and therefore effective education is closely related to life crisis periods (e.g., adolescence, youth, adulthood, maturity, middle-age, etc.) and/or situational crises. Typical examples of work-related crisis situations include: employee/manager adaptation crisis, routine work crisis, long tenure crisis. M. Klarin [1] adds a category of professional situation dynamic crises including: role/position change, job responsibility redesign, crisis of going through project team development stages., crisis of a department or whole organization going

through restricting (M&A, strategy change, significant downsizing, etc.); the latter crisis type involve collective entities, i.e. teams, departments, or whole companies.

3. Features of innovative practices in adult education.

In a meta-study in adult and continuing education [2] we have outlined the following changes in innovative vs conventional education practices: 1) goal setting, 2) character of the learner, 3) nature of education, 4) the nature of sources in the educational process, 5) nature of evaluation, 6) social (micro-social) role of education.

1) *Change in goal-setting*: from "learning" type of goal setting (e.g. mastering knowledge or skill) to transformational, contextual (including job contexts), managerial.

2) *Change in character of the learner*: from a freshman with zero relevant experience to an experienced person whose prior experience matters, as it overlaps with the newly generated experience; from a learner knowing willing to know to learner willing to act/transform, from an individual to a collective learner.

3) *Change in the nature of education*: from knowledge acquisition to knowledge-based transformation, and pragmatic educational effects.

4) *Change in the nature of sources in the educational process*: from information to real learner experience, from conventional to interactive learning.

5) *Change in nature of evaluation*: from evaluation of knowledge and skills to evaluating behavior/competency changes, as reflected in real

* Corresponding author: consult@klarin.ru

learner practices in their work environment, including evaluation of business performance and ROI.

6) Change of social (micro-social) role of education: from transferring culture (supportive or maintenance learning, according to [3]) to transforming cultural experience (innovative learning).

Innovative education practices provoke innovative changes of both individual and collective experience.

Mastering objectively new experience. We will consider experience known, when it is known by the initiators/organizers of educational process (e.g., "the teacher knows the right answer"); in this case, the novelty of the experience for the learners is artificial, or "pedagogical". Mastering new experiences in social interaction is enlargement of culture, i.e., adding accumulated, reflected and structured experience.

4. Innovative Learning and Innovative Education.

In innovative education we deal with a very special nature of the educational process, i.e. new experience is obtained mastering in the process of its generation. Innovative, transformative learning intentionally builds new professional experience in the process of experience transformation.

In situations of organizational change, a special type of learning for a collective entity is taking place, i.e. transformative education (see further).

Reconsidering The Idea of Educational Transference.

The task of transformative learning and transformative education is not only to support the collective shift to change the mode of action, but at the same time to grow this mode. Change of mode is not achieved using known samples. In the process of learning how to generate new production and management experience people also learn how to transfer this new experience to others.

Nowadays, such situations become common, i.e. often there are no samples of new experiences to be methodologically prepared to transfer, present, explain, or teach. This means that the very principle of educational adaptation of experience as a material for educational transference is to be totally reconsidered. [4]

5. Collective Learner.

Besides the conventional view on learning as individual process, modern educational practices call for special attention to the figure of *collective learner*. So far, extensive research and studies have been done on cooperative, or collaborative learning, in which two or more people learn together. Some authors look at cooperative learning as a milder form of unity, in which individuals take responsibility for a specific section and then coordinate their respective parts together, whereas collaborative learning implies a stronger group effort based on mutual engagement of all participants and a coordinated effort to solve the problem. P. Dillenbourg

[5] suggested that collaborative situations are characterized by three features: symmetry, shared goals and working together (P. Dillenbourg also refers to low division of labor in learning process which, as we will see later, is not always a must for organizational learning).

The present author defines collective learner as the *actor in collective learning* process in which collective learning outcome is obtained, or rather, produced.

6. Dynamic Capabilities and Organizational Learning.

What is being learned in organizational learning from the organizational standpoint? Companies do not think in educational or developmental terms. For the organization its learning ability is the means to keep up its *dynamic capabilities*, i.e. abilities which allow the company master and routinize actions aimed at the development and adaptation of operational routines, which ensure the effectiveness of the organization.

M. Zollo, and S.G. Winter [6] defined a dynamic capability as a learned and stable structured pattern of collective activity by which the organization systematically generates and modifies its operating routines (as different from the more generic competencies which serve as the object on which dynamic capabilities operate) in pursuit of improved effectiveness. Dynamic capabilities allow the Organization to flexibly manage, change and transform its operational routines in accordance with the changing environment. An important component of routines is the tacit knowledge; Unlike skills, it defies being clearly formalized. M. Zollo, and S.G. Winter argued that general organizational *learning mechanisms* for gaining dynamic capabilities the (organizational learning) include: (1) experience accumulation, (2) knowledge articulation, and (3) knowledge codification. As they describe the dynamic capability-building process: "Dynamic capabilities emerge from the coevolution of tacit experience accumulation processes with explicit knowledge articulation and codification activities." This research describing the dynamic capability-building process also gives insight into what can be done to deliberately shape this process, i.e. 'educate', or rather develop the organization as a collective learner. These mechanisms can be deliberately used to build organizational learning. When building the organizational learning the focus is primarily on eliciting the tacit knowledge.

Successful organizational learning is based on cyclical work which includes: generating new experience, and a retrospective analysis of the generation process in specially designed facilitation sessions. General outline of organizational learning is based on the Kolb's cycle. In our consulting experience retrospective analysis works as a "sublimation" or "second order" of Kolb's cycle

7. Phases of Transformative Education.

M. Klarin [2] suggested four general phases of transformative education in an organization: Adopting-Adapting-Transforming-Transferring (Fig. 1.)

Adopting Collective Experience. Challenge for the Organization: to master the professional experience (including management) by groups of employees in order to improve performance of individuals, departments, and/ or organization as a whole. Challenge for the participants: to master the professional experience presented in a normative way. Challenge for the facilitator: to transfer experience/standards of professional activity, to be adopted by participants who are learning by mastering the model experiences.

Adapting collective experience.

Challenge for the Organization: to adapt the experience of professional activity based on the proposals by employees to improve the work of a department or the Organization as a whole. Challenge for the participants: to learn and adapt expert (normative) an experience of professional activity, to partly revise standards of professional activity, to adapt them to the conditions of its activities. Challenge for the facilitator: to lead the discussion process, facilitate the process of adapting the new experience.

8. Transforming Collective Experience.

Challenge for the organization: to create new work experience (usually due to the experience of external experts, consultants), build and transfer new professional experience (including management) across the organization, transforming the work of a department or the organization as a whole. Challenge for the participants: generate new professional experience. Challenge for the facilitator: to facilitate the transformation process, transforming the experience of the participants. Participants develop professional norms/standards in the context of their activities and plan how to realize their standards.

9. Translating Collective Experience.

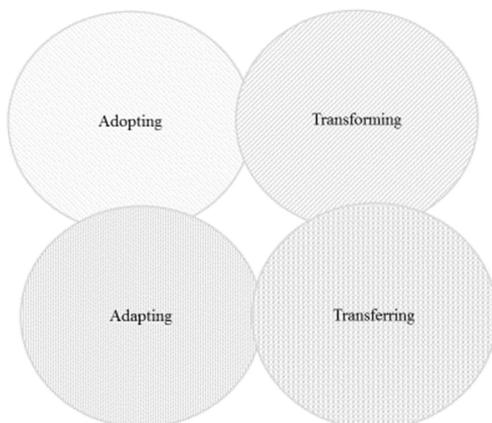


Fig. 1. Phases of Transformative Education

Challenge for the organization: to transfer/transmit new experience to update or transform the work of a department or the organization as a whole. Challenge for participants: to create procedure of transferring new professional experience, transfer it, involving next groups of employees in the process of learning, adapting, enriching, and transmitting new experience in a department or the organization as a whole. Challenge for the participants: to transfer new professional activities to other staff, performing a training role. Challenge for the facilitator; to facilitate the process of transferring the new experience.

10. Cyclic Models and the Collective Learner.

To describe and design organizational learning cyclic models are used. E.g., D. Garvin [7] breaks the process of organizational learning in three stages: gathering information, information processing, application. Organizations often use E. Deming's model: PDCA model (Plan – Do – Check– Act). In corporate practice organizational learning programs are often planned so that a team rather than an individual employee becomes the learner. J. Pfeffer and R.I. Sutton [8] note that in corporate development programs priorities are shifted from individual to collective/institutional results; they argue that it is the use of knowledge in the practical activity of the organization as a collective learner that defines the difference between successful and unsuccessful learning. In P. Senge's Learning Organization model [9] organizational learning emerges as a collective ability to systematically achieve the results desired by the members of the group.

11. Tacit Knowledge.

Experience to be transferred often includes 'implicit' or 'tacit' knowledge, the part of human experience which can hardly be clearly articulated and reflected on. The concept of tacit (personal, or silent) knowledge was coined by M. Polanyi [10]. A well-known example of tacit knowledge is riding a bicycle: a person who can do it is unable to pass on their knowledge. A talented teacher may not be able to describe the way in which he comes to their impromptu decisions, transforming the course of training. Similarly, in professional performance full description and transfer of the whole set of actions is not always possible.

In recent years, the interest of experts is drawn to tacit knowledge, which is often undetected basis for high efficiency, and/or (in the case of commercial companies) the basis for sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace. Management experts willingly quote the former Hewlett Packard CEO Lew Platt: «If only HP knew what HP know, we would be three times more productive”.

12. Paradoxes of Adult Education.

In adult education practice we may find paradoxes that do not fit the traditional educationalist's thinking. I treat paradoxes as cognitive conflicts, cues alerting our thinking in its proper sense, as a thorough exploration of the subject of the paradox.

Thus for exploratory pedagogical thinking paradoxes emerge as conceptual challenges indicating gaps between the phenomena of educational reality and familiar ways to describe this reality. Changes in understanding will be followed by relevant practical/pragmatic changes of educational practices.

13. The Paradox of Non-Academic Character of Learning.

In corporate learning practice, education becomes an integral part of human resource development. As a result, there is a contradiction between the "academic" nature of goal-setting (e.g., in terms of knowledge, skills and abilities) and managerial nature of the expected learning outcomes (changes of competencies, work activities, job performance, new performance outcomes of teams, departments, or the organization as a whole).

This paradox challenges the traditional pedagogical thinking. A response to this challenge I see in conceptual transformation of pedagogical thinking, and a pragmatic shift of educational goal setting to a coherent process of generating, recording, and developing of new cultural experiences. This paradox leads to paradoxes of non-academic learning goals and non-academic evaluation of learning outcomes.

14. The Paradox of the Actor.

In the process of structuring the process of education there arise gaps of the Actor subjectivity. (1) "Gap" between the "sponsor", and the "end user" of the learning process. The purpose of the learning comes from the leadership of the organization, while the active subject is participant/learner (individual or collective). (2) Inter-subject gaps are associated with the human resistance to changes work life mode that follow or are associated with expected learning outcomes. (3) the studies of trends in education, highlight a shift from the usual pattern when the figure of the Educator is seen as Actor as opposed to the shape of the Student. Here the educator, or facilitator is not seen as a soloist, but rather as an Actor, organizing community of other Actors.

These paradoxes challenge the conventional ideas of the learners' role in the process of education. I see the response to these challenges in conceptual change of educational mentality, and relevant pragmatic changes: (1) in conscious planning of non-academic/transformational learner interactions in learning cycles; (2) special design to take care of internal, personal gaps in upfront design of the learning/educating process.

15. The Paradox of Non-Expert Facilitator Role.

In corporate learning there is often a situation where the 'educator' (trainer, consultant) has the role of facilitator, guiding the learner generation of subjectively and objectively new experience. Here arises the paradox of expertise: the facilitator has no advantages over learners as related to the subject knowledge, his task is to arrange and facilitate a productive discussion leading to generation of new experiences.

These paradoxes challenge the conventional ideal of the educator/trainer/leader who transfers the content, has subject-matter expertise serving as a guide for the subject area. The response to this challenge is revising beliefs about the nature and essence of the educator's role, and pragmatic shifts in the use of their expertise in education.

Adult education process is based on development of holistic experience, and its transformation. Of course, in educational practice experience is always changing. However, in the conventional learning prevailing focus of experience change is on its shaping from zero. In the innovative adult education, the focus is changed to restructuring experience. Pragmatically speaking, the transformational nature of education calls for the use of reflective educational practices (interactive learning, action learning, coaching).

To build innovative learning practices, we need to make more extensive use of conceptual and practical tools of educational process design with focus on developing and building holistic individual and collective transformational experience.

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