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## Division of roles: teachers and learners in adult education

**Abstract:** This paper addresses the question of who is responsible for things that happen in the teaching–learning process with adults, and who those responsible are responsible to. This does not involve any normative questions involving normative definitions of responsibilities. It is, rather, a dialogue that begins with the question of what responsibilities there are in the first place and whether they are indeed necessary. The discussion is based on the teaching–learning process, in which learners have a social (or virtual) counterpart – a teacher. In spite of all the talk about self-guided and self-organised learning, this remains the 'normal case' in the area of intentional learning processes.

**Key words:** adult education, teacher's responsibility and roles.

### Responsibility as a didactic principle

There is no dimension of didactical action that is not directly associated with responsibility. In the immediate sense, responsibility means accountability for producing a (reasonable) response to a question that occurs. Questions like these come up at all levels of didactic activity, and they also need to be answered at all levels.

This applies first and foremost – when the discussion is focused on continuing education – at the macro-didactic level. The question here revolves around the societal function of continuing education; the serious question is to identify what continuing education needs to offer. The question of the societal responsibility of continuing education is put forwarded again and again when certain areas of human action pose problems. Educating people, teaching them

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to reason, has always been held to be a crucial precondition for shaping society and people's future along humanistic lines. Education is imperative if the development of democratic societies is to be steered, just as it is intrinsic to a dignified existence for individuals within society. It is in this fundamental sense that continuing education in its capacity as an element of the educational system is responsible for how people treat one another and the environment. The educational system in general and, with its 'adult' clients, continuing education in particular, play a major role in the conveyance of social meaning, and constitute a crucial integrating force in all areas of life. Adult education is thus also an important agent in conveying values; meaning and purpose to society as a whole (see Lühr and Schuller 1977).

In addition to these more general responsibilities of continuing education, special responsibilities are also repeatedly cited with respect to the connection between human activities on the one hand and human values – which is to say, social rationality – on the other. Such questions involve, for instance, environmental problems and environmental destruction by human beings themselves. Just like other areas of education, adult education is responsible in issues such as these for people understanding the consequences of their actions and being aware of their responsibility for these consequences. And also for them having sufficient understanding to be able to assess competing scientific hypotheses and explanations of the processes under scrutiny.

Another nexus of problems of concern to society as a whole in which the educational system is held to hold responsibility is the question of fascism and, by the same token, in particular the question of violence perpetrated on other persons (persons of a different opinion, people with a different appearance or who have a different attitude, etc). Education is responsible here as well for ensuring that people understand what 'being different' means and learning to accept it. Education is responsible for people understanding their own actions and realising the consequences of such. Education is responsible for inculcating human values in people's everyday lives.

In recent times, it has been maintained that adult education is also responsible for the inclusion of groups of the population threatened by social exclusion – certain groups of migrants, illiterates or long-term unemployed, for example. In this case the task is not only to assume responsibility in co-operation with groups of persons excluded by exclusion, but also to involve the entire social milieu and to assign education a specific role as a phenomenon encompassing society as a whole.

The question as to the acting subject always takes on added importance when problems are spelled out in more precise terms and more specific answers

are being sought. Mental abstractions or systematic definitions cannot bear any responsibility. Responsibility is a material good that only demonstrates its ethical and moral pertinence when it can also be perceived in actual application. Erich Kästner summed it up most succinctly when he said 'nothing is good in and of itself unless it is done'. 'Continuing education' is not an acting subject. It is not a defined actor. It is the systemic definition of a field (whose borders are incidentally completely open!), a playground with all kinds of actors (see Nuisl 2007a). The more concrete tasks and problems become, the more so can continuing education only assume its responsibility when it is specifically identified as an actor – and also expressly accepted as such. The ongoing debate in the area of educational policy over 'self-organised learning', in which people themselves assume responsibility for their education, is therefore ambivalent. Of course people are themselves responsible for their education to the extent that only they themselves are learning. On the other hand, in the overall societal context responsibility for macro-didactical organised learning processes has to be assumed by actors who are also truly able to perform this function.

To summarise, one can thus say that there is also a subject that is responsible itself for continuing education: society and – as an active agent – the state. If the state does not assume responsibility for the field of continuing education as a sub-system of society assuming responsibility in specific fields with certain actors in mind, the whole thing becomes less and less based on ethical imperatives to educate society, moving instead in the direction of a moral appeal.

### **Meso-didactics and micro-didactics**

The societal framework in which responsibility is viewed and discussed serves as the basis for being able to identify and define responsibility in the first place at the concrete level of didactics. This applies not only to the meso-didactics, but also to micro-didactics.

At the meso-didactic level this involves the structure of programmes and courses on offer, co-operation between institutions in certain educational processes and organising access, degrees, recognition and procedures. Responsibility at the meso-didactic level stands in close relationship to notions of how responsibility for continuing education is to be defined in overall societal terms.

Thus this broaches with respect to the inclusion of population groups, for example groups of migrants, the issue of the manner in which continuing education is put into practice. A view that sees the problems of the target group as ultimately having been created by the target group itself and hence leaves it

up to the target group itself to come to terms with these problems will lead to an approach that only addresses the target group with continuing education programmes. If on the other hand the problems of the target group are viewed as problems lying within a complex web of interrelationships between people in the host society, occupations, cultural and language arrangements that also involve other groups – for example civil servants in registration offices, managers and trainers at companies, representatives of associations, and other actors involved in these issues – then the devised integrated programmes are based on a precisely specified understanding of who bears responsibility for what in the context of complex systems. And the fact that this happens in the context of continuing education is based on the definition of continuing education as a societal task.

Another example here is political education. When the actors who are responsible for the political education of the population are not specified (or supported) at the macro-level, this resurrects the question in another light at the meso-didactical level. Educational institutions and persons who feel responsible for the political awareness of the population will get involved in political education within the framework of study programmes and courses. But if these cannot be financed as other study programmes are through tuition or earmarked subsidies, then it may instead be left up to a shift of financial resources from more ‘profitable’ programmes to the area of political education – an approach that some time ago was dubbed the ‘Robin Hood principle’ and has been practised as such ever since. As laudable as this is from the perspective of overall societal responsibility, at the operative level a form of responsibility is being perceived which would have to be realised at the macro-didactical level.

Another example is the development of programme structures that not only reproduce a reasonable quality of material, but which also conform to the needs and interests of learners. For instance, in the case of foreign language instruction, the task is to assume responsibility for types of programmes on offer being correctly differentiated in terms of the material and its quality as well as reflecting the preconditions and interests of the persons addressed by these programmes in a reasonable manner. This is a very concrete example at the level of programmes on offer for a ‘participant orientation’ which, when it comes to the specific teaching–learning process, is to be implemented in a corresponding teaching approach.

Arrangements relating to access paths for certain groups of persons, the presence of programmes offered in specific places, the ability to fund programmes and the opportunity for people to make use of them also constitute such questions of responsibility at the meso-didactical level. Ultimately, the concrete framework

of how in the teaching–learning process responsibility can be assumed directly by teachers in the teaching–learning process is set out at this level.

### **Micro-didactical responsibility**

In the area of continuing education, the question as to who assumes responsibility for what things in the teaching–learning process is based on premises that differ from those in elementary and secondary school. Participation in continuing education is voluntary – this is an important principle. Even when the question of ‘free will’ is viewed in a critical manner (for instance with respect to participation in language courses by immigrants who are required to do so by law, or in the case of continuing training programmes for staff at companies that are required to offer them), a ‘free decision’ is always being made by adults. At least to date, one should say, as it remains to be seen whether the societal imperative of having people assume responsibility for continuing education as a moral obligation, which has gained increasing currency at some point, becomes ‘mandatory’.

Secondly, an important premise among adults is that they be ‘accountable for their own actions’. Nobody has any obligation of any kind whatsoever to educate them – neither institutions nor teachers. Social norms and standards as well as laws and regulations setting out basic rights and obligations dictate that the task of educating young people before they reach the age of majority terminate when they turn 18. This means that there is no statutory foundation for adults to be provided education as a societal/state obligation.

To summarise, both of these premises – the voluntary nature of participation and the absence of any obligation on the part of the state to educate adults – mean that jurisdiction and responsibilities in the teaching–learning process have to be ‘negotiated’ and specified in a process involving both teachers and learners. While it is true that there are some foundations for this in place – for instance the form of preparation by teachers and learners before the teaching–learning process or, conversely, the anticipatory analogies to the teaching–learning processes in elementary and secondary schools – these nevertheless do not determine the actual comparison in the teaching–learning process.

This question has taken on a greater importance in tandem with teaching being increasingly subject to a changing perspective. It is less and less understood to involve a conveyance of knowledge, and is increasingly viewed as constituting more ‘educational action’ in the service of a successful learning process on the part of individuals characterised by a dialectical relationship between structures and actors (see Arnold et al. 2000).

The implementation of basic constructivist ideas in adult education (see Siebert 2005) was one of the major reason for moving questions concerning the legitimacy, efficacy and further development of educational competencies in relation to educational professionalism to the forefront. The previous focus of 'didactics' on the structuring of material has given way to greater attention being placed on teachers. Thus, the 'participants orientation', as among others Hans Tietgens put it around 30 years ago, has been moved to the heart of micro-didactical reflection and debate, where it has taken on a new quality.

This has led to reinterpretations of the role of teachers in almost every field; in the language field, for instance, teachers have tended to take on the role of 'learning consultants', in the field of political education they have become something like 'moderators', in art they are a sort of director in a 'modelling of situations and perceptions', while at business enterprises teachers are viewed as coaches or trainers. It would appear that teachers' traditional role as conveyors of knowledge has been lost.

If one examines this development process or at least the discussion from the perspective of the question of assignment of responsibilities and arrangements in the teaching-learning process, one can trace this trend by focusing on those elements that have been spelled out in more precise terms in delineating learning strategies (see Nuissl 2007b: 228): learning aims and objectives, the subject of learning, learning steps, methods, evaluation and solutions to problems.

### *Responsibilities with respect to learning aims and objectives*

One should first note the tremendous confusion that also reigns especially in educational science with regard to the difference between teaching and learning aims. Generally speaking, teachers only have 'teaching objectives' and learners only have 'learning objectives'. Most 'teaching objectives' contain target windows, however, which set out the desired learning objectives of the learners. And many teachers have assumed and continue to assume that these learning objectives which the teachers also cite are indeed those learning objectives that learners also want to attain (otherwise they would not have decided to take part in the course of their own free will). On top of this, an evaluation of teaching objectives is primarily performed at the level of the learning results achieved.

In view of the lack of clarity over terms, the question of responsibility occasionally becomes blurred. What actor – teacher or learner – is responsible for which definition of aims and how is this responsibility met in process terms?

If one examines self-organised learning programmes (this is where responsibility can most easily be ascribed to the learners), one is often surprised to find

that responsibility for various intermediate steps and modes of procedure in the learning process lies with the learners, while the specification of objectives is left up to the teachers. Nor is this state of affairs questioned or discussed at any length (see the 'Open Learning' project of the Hamburg Foundation for Vocational Education (ed., SBB, in Schlutz 1999). This is always so when 'teaching packages' (for instance study texts, CD-ROMs, etc) are used. The teaching objectives set out in these have an affirmative impact on the definition of learning objectives. Responsibility for the definition of learning objectives in most self-organised learning processes for this reason is therefore only at the operative level of selecting sub-goals along the path towards a general learning goal which is determined by the teachers. As is the case in most models of self-organised learning, these sub-goals are finely adjusted wherever possible to the learning strategies of individuals, which means that each individual can stake out their own path towards a specified goal.

This is even more evident in those teaching–learning processes whose basic structure is not self-organised. This is the case, for instance, in moderated processes of political or cultural education. In principle such teaching–learning processes always start off with a global learning objective which is specified by a teacher, even if it is not formulated in explicit terms. Generally speaking, the target level is not brought up for discussion repeatedly in the course of the teaching–learning process. Although this gives rise to process-related modifications of the learning aim in the course of moderated discussions, there is often no reflection on the target level and thus no explicit redefinition of responsibility for the target level.

The question as to how to specify objectives and stage these in a varying hierarchical system is a science in and of itself – and this question is especially discussed in the contexts of leadership and management (see Will 1992). Answering the question as to how to specify goals and describe them in their systematic context requires a professional knowledge which teachers must possess. In this regard teachers are also responsible for knowing what is needed to specify aims and objectives, of being adept at the process of formulating these targets and for making the modification of targets part of the teaching–learning process with the participants. They are not responsible for spelling out the learning objectives of the participants, and especially not for communicating these to participants as equals.

### *Responsibility and the subject of learning*

The subject of learning in the field of adult education must always be viewed in multidimensional terms. This involves not only the 'material', but also always the

interpretation of the material and the experience that all the actors have with the respective subject of learning. That is why it is important to distinguish between the 'topic' and 'content' in the area of adult education. The subject of learning is usually understood from the material side, in terms of the 'topic' – for instance the topic of 'health hazards at the worksite'. These topics are usually accompanied by a certain interpretation, however, which is based on the experience of the learners – in this, for instance, the content is 'solidarity'. This content can be discussed with the same intensity and emotion with other topics (e.g. 'unemployment'). In teaching–learning processes, the dual nature of topic and content can lead to two different things being discussed which are only loosely linked in the discussion. With respect to responsibility, this then creates a problem when teachers only address the topic while the participants only address the content (or vice versa) without this being clarified in the teaching–learning process (see Kejcz et al. 1979).

Generally speaking, the initial responsibility for the subject of learning is held by the teachers, who offer a specific course having a particular topic. Learners then decide to approach this topic (with their respective interpretation, which is hopefully precise), thereby also associating certain expectations and interest in the topic. The question as to whether the topical definition of the subject conforms to the actual interests of the learners must constantly be addressed in the course of the teaching–learning process. Teachers at the same time have the task of understanding the learning and reflecting on their own action (see Mandl and Kopp 2007: 117).

By the same token specific competencies are required, in particular the competence to be able to specify the difference between the topic and content as well as identify different modes of argumentation and thinking. This is a professional action-based knowledge, the possession of which teachers are just as responsible for as for the application of such in the teaching–learning process in the interest of joint work.

### *Responsibility and learning steps*

Learning steps lie in the domain of responsibility of the learners. They define – consciously or unconsciously – the steps in which they organise their learning process and which constitute the right approach for them within the framework of their individual learning strategy. They do this even when teachers themselves act this way or that.

On the other hand, teachers also have a two-fold responsibility with reference to learning steps: first of all, they have to relate the learning steps to the indi-



vidual members of a learning group in such a sequence that joint learning makes sense and is worthwhile for everyone involved. Secondly, teachers must introduce an analytical and didactical structure of the material in the teaching–learning process which allows learners to also define their prospective learning steps on the basis of the transparency created in this manner. Learners cannot reasonably ‘time’ their learning steps in a reasonable way without reference to the overall group of learners on the one hand and an overview of the ‘material’ (learning subjects) on the thematic side.

It is for this reason that the competence of learners is to be found here in the perception of individually selected learning steps, by balancing the individual learning steps of the members of the group (if possible as early on as in the course description) and presentation of the material in a manner that allows individual selection of the learning steps.

### *Responsibility and methods*

It is of course the task of teachers to put forward proposals on what mode of work and what methods should be used to organise the teaching–learning process. Making such an overview ‘transparent’ allows learners not only to get ready for certain modes of work, but also to set processes in motion that allow modification, change or the formulation of proposals of their own. Learners do not (normally) possess the knowledge and skills to allow them to apply learning methods.

It is therefore the responsibility of teachers to know and suggest methods with which the subject of learning can best be approached by the group of learners. The decision on what mode of work is to be adopted in the learning process does not lie in the domain of responsibility of the teacher, however. It is the teacher’s responsibility, rather, to create the foundations for decisions to be made and enable the learners and to anticipate the reasons for and, different aspects of, their decision. Every method, every working mode has advantages and disadvantages depending on the subject and what participants make up the group. The teacher must know this and be able to introduce it in a transparent and open dialogue with the learners. The teacher is also responsible for learners having the knowledge they need to make a decision on whether and what methods they intend to practise.

### *Responsibility and learning progress*

The learners themselves are ultimately responsible for their own learning progress – there is no doubt about this. Education is only a product when the course

offered by the teacher and the learning performance of the learners come together. However, the contribution of the teacher to the learning success must be assessed in order to legitimise this vis-à-vis the institution, the public and individuals themselves. This is a function of the review of learning progress. The other function is to allow learners to be provided with feedback on their learning performance. This feedback naturally has another quality for the learners than legitimising assessment of success by teachers.

Depending on the group of participants, the teacher must be in a position to find feedback processes for the learners that are appropriate for individual learners and the subject of learning while at the same time linking this up in a suitable manner with an assessment of success for the teacher's own work. These two functions can be combined methodologically and instrumentally (in a common evaluation), but not, however, in application and the analytical assessment.

Teachers therefore have to possess knowledge of what such evaluations and assessments of success look like and can be used, but they also need to have the reflective skills that allow them to assess for whom this evaluation communicates what message and with what degree of certainty. The teacher is also responsible for such assessments of success happening in the first place. And the teacher is responsible for the meaning and function of the same being commonly shared by all the participants without constraints in the teaching-learning process.

### *Responsibility and learning difficulties*

Nowadays it is often said that a large part of teaching in the field of adult education is to be found in so-called 'learning counselling', which is to say a type of counselling that supports the learning process and is available to each individual and learning group. The need for counselling is indeed greater to the degree that reflection takes place on the responsibility of learners for their learning processes and they put this into practice – if the counselling is also correctly understood as 'counselling', which is to say advice, with the person receiving the counselling deciding whether to accept or reject it.

The question as to learning difficulties in the teaching-learning process in adult education is sensitive, as it may involve individual learning difficulties as well as learning difficulties in the group. In the case of individual learning difficulties, educationalists are responsible not only for ensuring that the persons experiencing these difficulties are put in a position to overcome these, but also to make sure that such persons are protected in the group. Protecting the participants in a group process is one of the main tasks of teachers and is also one

of their main responsibilities, as only they have the power and the knowledge to ensure such protection in process terms in actual reality.

Difficulties in the group in the learning process are not the responsibility of the educationalists. Their task, rather, is to diagnose, specify and make the group conscious of decision-making procedures and counselling processes. What this means for the role and function of teachers themselves is another question; it may be painful if the group finds that their difficulties are to be found in the teacher and not in the group itself. It may also ease the situation, however, when this happens. The most important thing when it comes to learning difficulties is that these always be explicitly identified, analysed and defined and that a solution be found based on well-founded knowledge. For all these things the teacher needs knowledge, skills and the ability to carry through and put things into practice.

### **Responsibility for teachers**

In the examination of responsibility of teachers in the teaching–learning process (which has become normative at times!), it would appear that they often do not hold any decision-making responsibility in this process. This is then left up to the group of adults who are learning, but also in its very essence a sort of responsibility for competence. Responsibility for competence in this case means that the teachers themselves are responsible for possessing the competencies that they need for their work in the teaching–learning process. Such competencies include knowledge (about the subject, through acting as go-between, implementation, reflection, etc) which scarcely anyone possesses ‘per se’. Such competencies can be learned, but they also have to be learned if work teaching adult is to be of a good quality and be useful.

Responsibility for learning these competencies is first of all in the hands of the teachers themselves. It is their task to find ways and means of showing these competencies. This may be done in the form of learning by doing (in such a complex field of work, this takes many, many years, however), but should preferably take place in systematic education and further education. This once again raises the question as to who is responsible for teachers having the possibility of acquiring such competencies in a systematic way and at a high level of quality.

This brings me back to my opening remarks. The steps that must be taken in order to acquire such competencies can only be taken in a systemic construction of the educational system. This requires a commensurate education and continuing education system for teachers in the field of adult education, adequate support for the work of teachers and a proper framework (funding, social prestige

and research) in order to lift this work up to a rational, targeted level. It is in this sense that responsibility for teachers at the micro-level cannot be separated from the responsibility of actors at the macro-level including the respective responsibilities which lie between these. We shall only arrive at a responsible educational system which is indeed also able to embrace its responsibilities if the various responsibilities at the individual levels are specified, accepted and also practised accordingly.

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## Podela uloga: nastavnici i učenici u obrazovanju odraslih

**Apstrakt:** Ovaj rad tretira problem podele uloga i odgovornosti za ono što se dešava u procesu nastave i učenja odraslih, kao i pitanje dalje odgovornosti odgovornih za taj proces. Ovo razmatranje ne uključuje normativna pitanja, niti pitanje zakonskog određenja odgovornosti. To je više dijalog koji počinje razmatranjem definicije odgovornosti i pitanjem potrebe definisanja. Osnova ovog dijaloga jeste proces nastave i učenja, u kome onaj koji uči ima realnog ili virtuelnog saučesnika – nastavnika. I pored svih priča o samoorganizovanom učenju, pitanje odgovornosti i dalje je osnovno pitanje u oblasti procesa učenja na međunarodnom nivou.

**Ključne reči:** obrazovanje odraslih, odgovornost i uloge nastavnika.

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