

Chapter 10

Digital Literacy in a Lifelong Learning Programme for Adults: Educators' Experiences and Perceptions on Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT

The study presented explores aspects of adult learning on digital literacy in the context of a lifelong learning programme for social cohesion in Greece. The article outlines the framework of the digital literacy subject and underlines its associated objectives regarding adults' knowledge and competence in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The exploration draws upon the experiences and perceptions of eight adult ICT educators. The findings reveal that the educators tried to use flexible instructional practices that were adjusted to adult learners' needs and interests. Common effective instructional practices used were: ICT competence sessions, interdisciplinary and multi-literacy lessons, ICT-based projects, individual instruction sessions. Additionally, the article reveals the difficulties that adults faced in the course of developing ICT literacy skills. The paper ends with implications for the design of adult digital literacy courses in lifelong learning programmes, and for the preparation and development of the ICT educators in the years to come.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) during the last decades has radically affected citizens' individual and social lives and transformed the industrial-centred

society to a new, dynamic society described as *information society*, *knowledge society* or *global universal society*. This has presented new challenges to most adults, as they have to constantly keep up with the changes around them. Today, more than ever, adult learners need to update their knowledge for skills improvement, job

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advancement, personal growth and understanding (Lawson, 2005). Career and job changes are commonplace, and as a consequence adults must be able to acquire new skills so that they succeed and survive.

Since the late 1990s, only literacy and numeracy have been considered to be the basic skills for social and labour success. However, ICT literacy is nowadays considered as being a third important skill for work force and life alongside literacy and numeracy (EC, 2000a, 2001; DfES, 2003; NIACE, 2005). Within Europe, ICT has been identified as a key goal of educational policy and a major strategy aiming at helping EU citizens to participate in the 21st century *knowledge society and the knowledge-based economy* (EC, 2000b, 2001).

During the last decade, there has been an extensive discussion about *digital divide*, the divide between people who have access to technology, computers and the Internet and those that do not. Recently, the extension of the digital divide concept beyond mere physical access to computers and the Internet, gains attention and constitutes a central policy and research issue (Selwyn, 2004; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003; Van Dijk, 2006). The digital divide and the consequent information divide do not only exist between industrialised nations and developing countries. There is also a dichotomy, within individual societies, between those with easy access to digital media and an abundance of information, and those who do not know how and where to find information, and furthermore, do not understand the value of information and how it can help them in their day-to-day lives (Goulding, 2001).

Improving adult digital and ICT literacy levels is fundamental in terms of bridging the digital divide and effectively confronting the issues of exclusion and marginalisation that accompanies the increasing importance of ICT-mediated activities in modern social life. Increasing ICT usage by both young people and adults is considered as a

critical factor in reducing inequalities and ensuring people's inclusion in the social, economic and political life of their communities and societies, so that they have an influence over their own life chances. It has become apparent that digital literacy is not just about using the computer and the growing interest about the Internet and mobile technologies. Undoubtedly, ICT training can motivate people to develop literacy, numeracy and language skills. Moreover, ICT competency is necessary not only for citizens to function efficiently on a personal level, but also to develop, advance and succeed in their professional lives, and become active citizens in the information age, thus contributing to the social and economic success.

On the other hand, ICT also impacts on the nature of literacy and numeracy practices in daily life practices, at home and in the social arena. Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2009) have shown that citizens' digital skills level influences the extent to which the latter take up the online public and government services offered to them. Additionally, new digital literacies that involve multi-modal forms of expression are emerging such as the need to widen participation of adults in learning, lifelong learning and distance learning initiatives (Gorard et al., 2003; Mason, 2006), consequently facilitating flexible learning in terms of time and distance, and, thereby, establishing equal opportunities and conditions for a 'learning society' for all (EC 2000b, 2001).

Mere access to technology, however, does not enable one to effectively use it. Research data offer lots of knowledge regarding students' representations about computers and ICT systems, and the barriers encountered in using ICT to solve problems and in integrating ICT in their learning patterns. During the past decade a great number of studies have investigated various types of people regarding their attitudes and beliefs towards computers, such as students, teachers, adults (see Levine & Donitsa-Schmidt, 1998; Knezek & Christensen, 2002; Sugar *et al.*,

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