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# **Self-Directed Learning of Adult Educators by EPALE: Opportunities and Challenges**

## **Abstract**

Self-directed learning or even more exactly management of self-directed learning is one of the basic skills in the contemporary world for everybody and especially for adult educators. They need these skills for at least two reasons. First, the adult educators, especially those who are working in non-formal education, are very diverse and have very different possibilities to develop their qualification. Because of this the electronic platform for adult learning in Europe (EPALE) was established. Such knowledge systems, such platforms are very useful virtual learning environments for all adults. They create a lot of opportunities for users but at the same time raise some challenges and problems also, because to use it qualitatively adult educators need some skills and attitudes. For example, the exceptional feature of this platform is that active users can not only use the information, but also create or reconstruct, in other words, manage, the content of the platform also. It offers a place to meet and discuss important adult learning topics, as well as to exchange ideas and materials to support professional practice. This type of community platform is the first of its kind for the sector of adult learning, especially non-formal, but to use all the possibilities of this platform it is necessary to be active and able to manage your own learning process, in other words, the learner needs skills to manage self-directed learning. So one of the most important skills here is skills of self-directed learning and management of such learning. Moreover, the second reason is the need to be able to develop these skills for their students. Nevertheless, at first adult educators should have these skills by themselves.

The respondents' survey showed that they prefer to be more passive users of the platform and majority of them lack self-directed learning skills and abilities to manage their own learning not to mention their ability to develop these skills of their students.

**Keywords** / electronic platform for adult learning / management of self-directed learning / self-directed learning



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## **Introduction**

Self-directed learning or even more exactly management of self-directed learning is one of the basic skills in the contemporary world for everybody and especially for adult educators. They need these skills for at least two reasons:

1. The adult educators, especially those who are working in non-formal education, are very diverse and have very different possibilities to develop their qualification.
2. The educators' need to be able to develop these skills for their students. But at first adult educators should have these skills by themselves.

To eliminate or minimize the first reason and at the same time to empower adults – learners and also their educators we already have great tool - the electronic platform for adult learning in Europe (EPALE) - a multilingual open membership community for teachers, trainers, researchers, academics, policy makers and anyone else with a professional role in adult learning across Europe.

The main goal of EPALE is to bring together the community of adult education professionals in a multilingual, dynamic, interactive and innovative space. The platform is intended for adult educators, andragogues, lecturers, volunteers, as well as policy makers, researchers and lecturers working in the field of adult education, in other words, for all, who in one or another way is interested in adult education and quality improvement. It enables adult educators, experts to get acquainted with the latest trends in adult education in Europe, exchange experiences in cyberspace, comment on the information provided in the platform, participate in practical communities of EPALE, discuss relevant adult education issues, search partners for project activities, etc.

Aim of the platform, as all the academic platforms or social networks (Jeng, DesAutels, He & Li, 2017) is to become the main reference point for adult learning professionals in Europe. It offers a place to meet and discuss important adult learning topics, as well as to exchange ideas and materials to support professional practice. This type of community platform is the first of its kind for the sector of adult learning, especially non-formal.

One of the most important features of this platform is focus on the community. Members of EPALE community can engage with adult learning colleagues across Europe through the site's features, including the forums, commenting under blogs; interacting with peers across Europe through the thematic areas, which provide structured content according to topic; finding projects and making professional connections using the partner search repository.



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Another very important feature is of EPAL is a strong editorial policy that also centers on the adult learning community. All users should feel welcome on the site, and to trust the information that is presented on this platform.

The platform is very important also because the general agreement that adult learning by 2030 will be able to take advantage of an abundance of learning materials including open educational resources (OER), produced in multiple and collaborative ways, offered by many different providers and players, and used/reused by learners, enabling strong personalization of the learning processes. Fluidity will be the key to allowing learners to move easily from one educational setting to another without impediments, according to their own interests and needs of the moment. This vision is not necessarily new but is becoming more likely as we move towards a digital networked society. (Castaño Muñoz, Redecker, Vuorikari & Punie, 2013).

In this case, the knowledge systems especially specialized are very important and useful. The need of such kind of leaning environments is confirmed also by the fact that though this platform was establish 3 years ago, but already now has more than 34 000 registered members, more than 15 000 different kind of resources (scientific articles, methodic, news, practical cases etc.), more than 50 different Communities of practice and it's constantly growing.

Of course, such knowledge systems create a lot of opportunities for users but at the same time raise some challenges and problems also (for example, lack or limits of knowledge managing, information seeking, self-directed learning and other skills). For example, the exceptional feature of this platform is that active users can not only use the information, but also create or reconstruct, in other words, manage, the content of the platform also. This offers opportunities for creative thinking and the application of technological tools to support pedagogy, which, in turn, will empower us to participate in our societies knowledgeably and with respect for all. (Grassian, 2017, p.232-239) All this means that EPAL was established to create better possibilities for adult educators to develop their qualification, but to use it qualitatively adult educators need some skills and attitudes. At first, it is skills of self-directed learning and management of such learning.

### **Self-Directed Learning Competence as a Precondition for Lifelong Learning**

Meaningful and successful personal and professional life of today and the future requires the person's ability to adjust to the constantly changing environment, the ability and inclination to



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constructively react to changes, act in accordance with constantly renewing and increasing information. For that purpose, we need to be able to learn; therefore, the idea of lifelong learning is raised as one of the most important educational aims and one of the essential expected outcomes. Learning to learn is understood as the person's wish and readiness to take up new tasks, the ability to control cognitive and emotional processes while learning and apply acquired abilities in various contexts. Due to these reasons, there is more focus on metacognitive abilities, which are relevant in today's creative and knowledge society and the lifelong learning paradigm and the importance of which is accentuated in many international and national documents on education (Schools for the 21 century. Commission Staff Working Document, 2007 etc.). It is expected that while learning the man will perceive changes as a natural continuous process, will be open to it, will be able to be self-confident, raise meaningful improvement goals and purposefully seek them (Knowles, 1983, Sahlberg, 2005, Stanišauskienė, 2005). In this context learning in order to acquire knowledge, act, live together and learning for life in general, become significant (Stanišauskienė, 2005).

In this context, learning to learn is understood as the person's wish and readiness to take up new tasks, the ability to control cognitive and emotional processes during learning and apply acquired abilities in various contexts. (Knowles, 1983, Sahlberg, 2005 et al.).

In order to succeed in learning, the learner has to understand the worth of learning, treat it as the lifelong learning process, feel the need to learn and improve, seek to know himself/herself as a learning person, have disposition and be able to independently, purposefully and persistently seek the set aim, be self-confident, believe in success of learning, feel responsibility for his/her learning activities, process and outcomes, be able to share knowledge and acquired experience with others, etc.

Anyway, developed approaches do not ensure success of learning to learn. It is necessary to know and understand how the learning process takes place, what ways and strategies are suitable for solving one or another learning problem, one must know that there are various learning styles, what concrete learning style, learning powers and possibilities of the concrete person are, what sources are available for learning, etc.

Therefore, the competency of learning to learn can be defined as readiness and the ability to independently raise learning aims and according to the need and/or situation correct them, plan and organize the learning process, solve arising various type problems, reflect on one's learning experience and evaluate obtained results considering them, manage the process of one's further learning, etc. It is



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important to perceive that learning to learn is not only acquisition of subject knowledge or abilities, this is thinking about one's learning process and its management. This first of all requires knowledge of the process of learning and its management peculiarities, cognition of oneself as a person and as a learner, the ability to apply various learning strategies and technologies, etc.

The importance of independent, responsible, creative, active person who is able to learn and act in a self-directed way is still more actualized when the (self-)educational process steps beyond the traditional environments and forms and takes place in new real (teaching and learning in the library, in the nature, enterprise, etc.) and virtual (e-learning, distance learning) environments, using the reality that is being created here and now, one's and others' experience as sources of teaching and learning and, based on them, creating one's individual knowing and acting here and now. Emphasizing the learner's active and conscious participation, also taking part of responsibility for both learning outcomes and the process of the very learning and teaching, the learning paradigm also presupposes the need to (self-)develop the corresponding abilities and competencies. One of such abilities is (self-)development of information management (informational skills) skills. World educologists (Herring, 1998 et al.) accentuated their importance already at the end of the 20 century. According to them, informational skills as the basis of learning skills make a big influence on efficiency and quality of education. The analysis of research literature (Balčytienė, 1998) showed that in Lithuania these skills are more systematically and better developed in the basic school meanwhile world experience (Herring, 1998) evidently shows that that development of informational skills, information management (its search, selection, based on corresponding criteria, etc.) abilities should start already in primary classes and even still earlier. But it is necessary to recognize that a lot of adult learners lack this ability of self-directed learning.

Considering quantity and quality of information existing today, the speed with which it is created and updated, presented to the consumer, etc., it is evident that today it is impossible and there is no need to cover all flow of information. On the contrary, it is particularly important to be able to find, select, analyze, evaluate information and perform other information management operations. In addition to general literacy, ICT management, critical thinking, creativity, etc., today it is particularly relevant for the person to be able to act and manage that information responsibly. The general culture of information literacy also becomes important.



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One of the possible variants of (self-) development of this ability could be work with literature (usage of various printed sources), seeking not only to acquire subject knowledge but also emphasizing (self-) development of thinking. This, in turn, would encourage communication and cooperation of the (self-) educational process participants not only performing the activity but also planning it, develop the learner's responsibility for this activity and its results, enable to differentiate and individualize the (self-) educational process, etc.

### **Responsibility in the System of Self-Directed Learning Orientated to Innovative Solutions**

Comprehensive schools today still encounter such problems as: 1) excessively big orientation of the curriculum to knowledge and development of pupils' academic abilities; 2) lack of non-traditional (self-) educational forms encouraging flexibility of the teaching and learning process and interaction with life practice; 3) lack of competencies of various school community members (teachers, parents, pupils, etc.) in the area of management of pupils' learning process, particularly in the educational practice, etc. (Correspondence of Teachers' Didactic Competency to Contemporary Education Requirements, 2005). In the conditions of rapid economic changes, when the importance of creative society is increasingly more accentuated, the requirements for the contemporary educational system are changing: it must become open, related to life, preparing a free, creative person who is able to learn all his/her life. Key documents on education emphasizing perspectives of the future of school activities, progressively orientate to the teacher's activity grounded on the learning paradigm. Self-directed learning is one of the ways to achieve that natural endeavour to learn meaningfully continues until adulthood.

The need for the school to change its mission; i.e., from socialization (i.e. knowledge and abilities necessary for the individual's adequate functioning in the today's world) towards competencies necessary to ensure successful functioning in the world of increasingly fast changes, has already been emphasized by N.Knowles (1983). The school must become the forge of teaching and learning, where learning and self-teaching abilities are acquired. In the context of the Bologna process currently it is particularly important to develop such skills and abilities which would help to treat changes as possibilities and to implement new ideas encouraging innovations and active participation in a multi-cultural and knowledge society (Decision of the European Parliament and the Council concerning the European Year of Creativity and Innovation (Brussels, 2008.3.28 KOM (2008))).



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Identification of the person's learning needs and resources on one's own initiative, formulation of learning aims, choice of the most suitable learning strategy, self-assessment of learning outcomes according to chosen criteria, etc. are essential characteristics of self-directed learning, emphasized in this model. It is important that already at school the child should learn to manage his/her learning process; i.e., be able to set a learning aim, foresee necessary activities and most suitable ways to reach it, monitor the learning process and outcome, be able to organize and if necessary change the learning process, based on assessments and reflections.

The goal of self-directed learning organization system is to educate self-directly learning personalities making innovative decisions, which have acquired bullying prevention and non-discrimination competencies. This is emphasized in many European documents on education and national documents regulating education (in the conclusions of the European Council "On Preparing Young People for the 21 Century" (2008/C 319/08), Communication from The Commission to The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions „Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-economic Outcomes“(COM (2012) 669, Strasbourg, 20.11.2012) etc.).

The system of self-directed learning orientated to innovative solutions and its suitability responding to requirements and challenges arising for today's comprehensive school and the educational process in general. The idea of self-directed learning as meaningful learning, which increases learner's independence, responsibility, expands their social participation, is grounded. Otherness, which is often the basis and the pretext of bullying, is acknowledged as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Learning cooperatively, sharing experiences, searching for innovative solutions and implementing them, otherness is perceived as one of the favourable and even necessary conditions enabling to reach more efficient, better quality holistic result of any teaching and learning activity. From the perspective of learning to learn (self-) education orientated to innovative solutions is significant because it is sought to activate learners to solve problems, individually but responsibly make adequate, innovative decisions in order to solve a corresponding problem.

Implementation of the self-directed learning system at school changes both the learner's and educator's activities and their roles. The educator turns into an assistant, advisor for the learner and not a direct renderer of knowledge who takes responsibility for the person's learning and mastering. This means that limits of responsibilities are redistributed, formal and non-formal environments merge, the



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learner's freedom and responsibility show up, autonomy dominates. In this respect the educator's ability to cognize the learner, notice his/her individual traits, needs, etc. becomes important. Teaching and learning in the individualization aspect is grounded on the essential condition: not teaching, rendering of knowledge, skills and faculties is important but the learning process in which the educator helps the learner to find the individual way of learning that is suitable only for him/her, grounded on his/her individual inclinations, interests, abilities. This way the educator helps the learner to form as a personality, realize him/her, be proactive, participating. Proactiveness here means the learner's freedom of action and personal responsibility for decisions and actions which he/she takes and performs in the teaching and learning process.

And the second reason is the educators' need to be able to develop these skills for their students. But at first adult educators should have these skills by themselves.

This platform is very useful virtual learning environment for all adults. Such knowledge systems, such platforms create a lot of opportunities for users but at the same time raise some challenges and problems also (for example, lack or limits of knowledge managing, information seeking, self-directed learning and other skills). The exceptional feature of this platform is that active users can not only use the information, but also create or reconstruct, in other words, manage, the content of the platform also. It offers a place to meet and discuss important adult learning topics, as well as to exchange ideas and materials to support professional practice. This type of community platform is the first of its kind for the sector of adult learning, especially non-formal., but to use all the possibilities of this platform it is necessary to be active and able to manage your own learning process, in other words, the learner needs skills to manage self-directed learning.

And one of the most important here is the ability to manage self-directed learning. Because of this development of abilities and skills of self-directed learning and its management becomes one of the priorities of adult education.

The respondents' survey showed that they prefer to be more passive users of the platform and one of the reason here is that majority of respondents recognized that they lack self-directed learning skills and abilities to manage their own learning and, of course, they are not sure would they be able to develop these skills for their students. So develop of their self-directed learning abilities should be one of the most priorities now, especially because of the great possibilities that are created by EPALE.





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*Learning innovation and its implementation, learner's cognition and recognition, self-directed learning and development abilities of self-directed learning, the coherence of freedom and responsibility in the process of learning, and ensuring and improving the process of learning in the learner-centered paradigm is just a part of the research interests and researches by Rasa Pocevičienė, the results of which have been published in more than 60 different scientific and methodological publications in Lithuania and abroad, presented at more than 50 scientific, methodological, including international conferences. The dissemination of these ideas also takes place in original courses, seminars, training, project preparation, consulting and innovation and other educational practice.*