

1 Trainers' skills and postures: from competence to focus

In the preceding section we have explored some key aspects of learning processes adapted to adults. The aim of this section is to take one more step towards the perspective of the facilitator. Ultimately our aim is to map those features in the behaviour, attitude, posture of the facilitator that can create a favourable learning environment. How to proceed? The concept often used to tackle such questions is that of “competences” or

“key competences”. In some models, the trainer competences are summarized into few basic areas of knowledge, skills and attitudes, while, there are also studies with a higher ambition for detail, such as the one proposed by Buiskool et al (2010) “Key competences for adult learning professionals”. Here the researchers found 20 key competencies classified into three main groups.

Generic competences (A)

- 4.3.1 Being a fully autonomous lifelong learner (A1)
- 4.3.2 Being a communicator, team player and networker (A2)
- 4.3.3 Being responsible for the further development of adult learning (A3)
- 4.3.4 Being an expert in a field of study/practice (A4)
- 4.3.5 Being able to deploy different learning methods, styles and techniques (A5)
- 4.3.6 Being a motivator (A6)
- 4.3.7 Dealing with heterogeneity and diversity in groups (A7)

Specific competences: directly involved in the learning process (B)

- 4.4.1 Being capable of assessment of adult learners' learning needs (B1)
- 4.4.2 Being capable of designing the learning process (B2)
- 4.4.3 Being a facilitator of the learning process (B3)
- 4.4.4 Being an evaluator of the learning process (B4)
- 4.4.5 Being an advisor / counsellor (B5)
- 4.4.6 Being a programme developer (B6)

Specific Competences: supportive for the learning process (B)

- 4.5.1 Being financially responsible (B7)
- 4.5.2 Being a people manager (B8)
- 4.5.3 Being a general manager (B9)
- 4.5.4 Dealing with PR and marketing (B10)
- 4.5.5 Being supportive in administrative issues (B11)
- 4.5.6 Being an ICT- facilitator (B12)

Buiskool et al (2010) “Key competences for adult learning professionals”

Table 4. – Example of a competence list.

Such lists can sometimes appear as intimidating to practitioners. Are we supposed to possess and develop all these competences at once? And what would be their relative importance?

The concept of “competence” has sometimes been criticised for being too static and individualistic, exclusively focusing on stable components of knowledge, attitude and skill and neglecting the

importance of the fluid social dynamics, and attention to the needs of the context. For this reason, here we propose to use an alternative concept as a central metaphor for our inquiry.

Focus or “sensibilité à”

Récopé et al (2013) use the concept of “sensibilité à” (literally translating to “sensitivity to”) in order to

capture differences in the qualities of presence of people with regard to their specific context. Récopé and his colleagues actually look at volleyball players and distinguish three different orientations in the way players are active in the field. Participants seen as “little active” tended to occupy a rather static position, waiting for the ball to arrive close to them, which then would trigger a response from them, consisting in hitting the ball with the proper gesture. Whenever the ball was further away from them, they were in a relaxed, resting mode. “Moderately active” players were seen as attentive to performing their role in the team: they came out of their resting pose whenever they sensed they had a role to play for the good development of the game. This is an attention to collective organisation and achieving one’s task in the collective. Players of the third category, the “very active”, had their attention on avoiding the break in passes in their own team and on provoking it for the other team. How can we turn the conclusions drawn from the analysis of volleyball to the domain of adult trainers? According to Recope each of these three postures offers a particular angle on the perception of the situation and on what values and norms are followed. We’ll explore these angles for volley-ball and for adult training.

Perception

Recopé and his team observed that the three different types of volley-players had different perceptions on when the situation becomes relevant for them. The “little active” players perceived the situation as relevant when the ball comes in proximity to them. The “moderately active” players perceive relevance when they have a role to play. “Very active” players will follow the ball, regardless of its position close or far from them, and get in action even if there was a player who could possibly intervene, as the situation is relevant whenever the ball could fall in their field, and whenever it could be made to fall on the other territory. We are indeed in any moment surrounded by a myriad of stimuli simultaneously, and from these we select what is relevant, what makes the situation for us seem relevant. « Only a small part of all dynamics in the environment enter as perturbations into the domain of relevance of the organism. All other possible interactions just fall outside of the possibilities of experience of the system” (Weber & Varela, 2002, 118)

Our “Focus” will thus select the range of relevant stimuli from the environment. So will one trainer see different aspects of the events during a class than another. We have all met trainers who can get completely oblivious of the passage of time, while other trainers don’t lose completely sight of the clock. Some trainers are bothered by the murmuring between two participants at the back of the class while others don’t seem to perceive it. These perceptions will trigger reaction on behalf of the trainer: the trainer concerned about the

flow of time will speed up, and who’s bothered by the private interaction of two participants will interpell them, inviting them either to share with the group or taking some disciplinary action. Indeed, what we perceive and mostly how we’ll react is dependent on what we have learnt as important: norms and values that we have acquired to organise and give meaning to the world around us.

Values and norms

The way the three types of players behave is telling of cultural values and norms they have acquired from their trainings in a more or less explicit way. “Little active” players acquired the norm of the form or quality of the gestures for hitting the ball. The “moderately active” players have learnt the game as one of collective organisation and collaboration. For the third group, it is the norm at the heart of volley-ball game itself: how to prevent the ball at whatever costs from falling on one’s territory, how to provoke the break of passes for the other team. For Récopé et al “Sensitivity to” is always a manifestation or expression of cultural values and norms that the individual has assimilated, integrated.

Convictions of what is important in the teaching process, the representation of what is learning, what is a teacher, or more largely how human interactions should be, will lie at the heart of the trainer’s system of beliefs, norms and values that will underlie her perceptions and reactions. The trainer with a higher power distance, attributing more importance to authority will be more likely to taking disciplinary measures against the two murmuring learners than the trainer with a strong belief in horizontality and participation.

Inside / outside

On one hand the focus we are describing seems to be an internal act of the person. As Récopé phrases “sensibilité à”: “It is a characteristic of the lively, a basic motivator, encompassing cognitive, affective and behavioural components. It makes the difference between dynamic activity and inertia or indifference.” It orients the desires, the actions of the individual, the mobilisation of the body, organises the totality of action and lived experience. But it cannot be considered an internal feature. In the French expression “sensibilité à” or its literal translation “sensitivity to”, the presence of the postpositions “à” or “to” points to the fact that this sensitivity is not an internal characteristic. Rather it always expresses a specific relation to something, an orientation towards, a focus on. (Récopé et al 2013). This emphasis on the relational aspect, on the position in between the internal and the external is maybe the main distinguishing feature of the concept of “competence” which is all too often understood as internal and static.

Focus of the trainer

To sum up, focus in the context of the pedagogical activity orients the construction of meaning around the trainers' activity and conditions her practice. It is orienting her attention, determining her movements with relation to her participants and her choices of action in

the specific context of her work. In the following we present our model identifying the five different "sensitivities" or orientations to focus, that we identified through secondary research and through our pilot experiences.