

DIDACTIC APPROACH TO LITERACY: METHOD OF PAULO FREIRE

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Abstract:

The state of inertia of international efforts for adult literacy is only one of the indicators of the lack of professionals on the international and national level that could analyze, interpret and simplify adult literacy goals and transfer them into educational programs and activities in which illiterate adults could participate. There is certain discrepancy between literacy policy makers, reports from international bodies and conferences on one side, and the practitioners who deal with that problem on the other side; who emphasize the need for highly qualified professionals to interpret the policy rhetoric and transform it into appropriate literacy programs. One thing is certain, formal primary education of adults does not meet educational challenges of the "new generations". The aim of the paper is to examine and present how successful the Paulo Freire's literacy model is in practice, which goes beyond the conventional approaches to literacy (and didactics), and is based primarily on adults' interest and motives for involving in educational activities. The results show that it is necessary to create and implement an appropriate literacy model which will surpass the barriers and limitations of formal educational manifestation and out-dated teaching methods and techniques. Conclusions and recommendations offered in this paper are pointing towards future steps that primary education for adults in the Republic of North Macedonia should undertake to eradicate the illiteracy among adults in the country in order to help them adapt to life and work.

Keywords: evolution, critical consciousness, literacy

INTRODUCTION

Emphasizing the need for affirmation of the lifelong learning concept as a personal and societal requirement, contemporary living conditions give literacy a new treatment, as a complex personal action, but also an organized social action. Bearing in mind the overwhelming data on illiteracy among people on the global scale, adult literacy activities and programs are seen as a challenge and a critical desideratum.

All the efforts by the international bodies and organizations show the seriousness and depth of the literacy issue, that cannot be solved with quick and palliative interventions. That phenomenon is also evident in the Republic of North Macedonia

and in order to surpass it, we must invest effort, skills and persistence of all agents involved in a global and well-organized process.

OVERVIEW OF DEFINITIONS ABOUT LITERACY (STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS ON LITERACY)

At first glance, “literacy” seems to be a term that everyone understands. But at the same time, the concept of literacy has proved to be both complex and dynamic, constantly being interpreted and defined in multiple ways. People’s notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences. In the academic community, theories of literacy have evolved from those focused merely on changes in individuals to more complex views encompassing the broader social contexts (the “literate environment” and the “literate society”) that encourage and enable literacy activities and practices to occur. As a result of these and other developments, its understandings in the international policy community have expanded too: from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change. This chapter traces the evolution of these different understandings of being (and becoming) “literate” and shows how variants of these ideas have been integrated into policy discourse. In addition, the definitions of literacy proposed by international aid organizations will be presented.

Table 1. Aid agencies’ definitions of literacy.¹

Organization	Definition of literacy
UNICEF	Functional literacy is the ability to use reading, writing and numeracy skills for effective functioning and development of the individual and the community. Literacy is according to the UNESCO definition (“A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short statement on his or her everyday life.”).
Department for International Development (UK); United States Agency for International Development; World Bank	Literacy is a basic set of skills (reading, writing and counting) or competencies.

¹ This Table representation is from the UNESCO Report Education for all – Literacy for life (2006: 147).

Organization	Definition of literacy
Canadian International Development Agency; Danish International Development Assistance; New Zealand's International Aid and Development	Literacy is one of the skills that basic education should provide or a component of basic education.
Agency BMZ [German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development]; the Netherlands	Literacy is reading and writing skills, and it indicates the capacity for further learning.
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency	Literacy is about learning to read and write (text and numbers) and also about reading, writing and counting to learn, and developing these skills and using them effectively for meeting basic needs.

According to the United States' organization for *National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)*, literacy is defined as the "ability to use written information in order to successfully function in the society, to accomplish certain personal goals, as well as to develop individual knowledge and potential" (National Assessment of Adult Literacy: Literacy in everyday life, 2007: 2).

According to the OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), reading literacy is defined as: understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, develop one's knowledge and potential, and participate in society (OECD, 2003).

The broader definitions of literacy encompassed in today's knowledge-based societies should provide competences and skills to positively interact with changes and opportunities that today's rapidly changing world offers in the working and living conditions. In fact, people should be equipped with competences in order to be fully prepared to engage as individuals, parents, workers and citizens in economic, societal and cultural changes in continuing globalization of the economy and society, as well as fast expansion of communication technologies. In other words, literacy presupposes possibilities for education for all, no matter the societal status, culture, race, religion, gender, handicap, etc. with the aim to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for self-realization and self-development of active and responsible participants in the contemporary society. We can conclude that the key feature of being literate is the ability to understand and use countless information from everyday life in different contexts (Rizova, 2015).

According to the above-mentioned explanations and definitions of literacy, there are four areas that the contemporary notion of literacy encompasses: context, application, time and learning. The factor referring to the context can be critical in the literacy process. Hence, an individual can be considered literate in one context, and illiterate in another. Also, it is very important that literate persons are aware that lots

of words, actions and customs have different meaning in different countries.² Time, as a factor, is emphasizing that individuals should reflect on what they have already learned in order to understand the current situation and to adapt to the future.³ The factor of learning is about the learning paths and methods as means of achieving literacy. Namely, adults should not always be included in the formal literacy education programs. They learn more easily through non-formal and informal paths of learning which are most typical for working with adults in general. The fourth factor is application and it refers to application of what one has learned in different problem situations which adults face on a daily basis. Hence, the ability to apply knowledge in different situations and various contexts can be improved throughout life (Rizova, 2015).

The understanding of literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia is mainly deduced to the UNESCO's definition of a literate person as an *individual that knows and is able to use written text in everyday life and work*. But there is still no consensus about the required level of those knowledge and skills.

According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (UIS), official definition of literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia is the one that was used during the Census of population in 2002: "Persons having completed more than three grades of primary school were considered literate. In addition, literate was a person without school qualification and with 1–3 grades of primary school, if he/she can read and write a composition (text) about everyday life, i.e. read and write a letter, regardless of the language."⁴

ADULT LITERACY IN PRIMARY ADULT EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

According to the Law for adult education,⁵ there are specific teaching programs of primary education of adults conducted by the institution for adult education. Article 20 of the Law states that programs of adult education can be realized through regular education, consultative, instructive and distance education, open education, multimedia education and other appropriate learning methods and paths. But unfortunately, we must state that the last forms of teaching and education are not commonly seen in adult education in the Republic of North Macedonia.

² For example, it is known that in European countries, the bride wears white dress during the wedding ceremony, while in most Asian countries the bride's dress is red.

³ For example, over the past couple of decades we have witnessed a dramatic change in the way the telephone is being used.

⁴ Definitions of literacy in Republic of North Macedonia according to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics 2011, *Education Indicators and Data Analyses*.

⁵ Ministry for education and science of Republic of Macedonia (2008), *Law for adult education*, Articles 17 and 18, Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia n. 7/08.

On the other hand, according to the legislative, programs of adult education can be realized by teachers, professors, instructors for practical teaching and educational councilors. Teaching staff that is involved in adult education should obtain special preparation for educational work with adults, which is organized in appropriate institutions. They also have the right and the obligation to get involved in continuous professional development.

Participants in the programs of adult education can be all individuals older than 15 who fulfill all other requirements for the program. They hold a status of a *participant* in adult education program. The participants acquire certificate for gained competences from the programs for adult education. The programs of adult education validate previously acquired knowledge if a person passes tests in appropriate institutions for primary education.

Educational plans and programs in primary adult education are organized in eight educational cycles with the duration of four years. In one school year, adults students finish two, instead of one educational cycle, which is the case in primary education of children. But still, bearing in mind all the family-related, job-related and other obligations that adults deal with every day, it is a challenge to keep them in school for such a long time.

Educational plans are constructed according to the same methodology as the educational plan for primary education of children, based on certain ratio between mandatory, elective and facultative subjects. It consists of educational contents that are almost identical to the contents created for children, and are usually not of interest for adult students. Another challenge that adult students are facing is the lack of school textbooks. Namely, there are no specific textbooks intended for adult students, so they learn from textbooks created for children's age and interests and are not adjusted for adults. This is an additional negative stimulus that causes disinterest and demotivation for learning among adult students.

In primary adult education in the Republic of North Macedonia, there are three models of educational plans; two of them are for compulsory educational courses and one is for a preparatory educational course.

- Educational plan for adolescents from 15-24 years of age (with the duration of four years);
- Educational plan for adults above 24 years of age (with the duration of four years, but with a reduced number of learning subjects and classes per week. This is because it is assumed that they have more working and family obligations);
- Educational plan for preparatory/consultative courses (which are intended for adults with certain elementary knowledge of reading, writing and calculating and are capable for self-directed education with mentorship from educator, are employed and cannot participate in compulsory educational courses).

When addressing the issue of adult literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia, it is inevitable to point out the statistical overview of the situation. Namely, almost 20% of the actively working population older than 15 has low educational level and has no vocational qualification. The proportion is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Population by gender and education degree.⁶

Education degree	Labor force	
	2017	%
Total	954 212	100
Without education	3308	0,35
Incomplete primary and lower secondary education	17 864	1,87
Primary and lower secondary education	164 324	17,22
men		
Total	582 773	61,07
Without education	1937	0,33
Incomplete primary and lower secondary education	10 433	1,79
Primary and lower secondary education	112 374	19,28
women		
Total	371 439	38,93
Without education	1371	0,37
Incomplete primary and lower secondary education	7431	2,00
Primary and lower secondary education	51 950	13,99

For the statistical profile of the literate population in the Republic of North Macedonia the official data can be found only in the State statistical office and it refers to the latest Census of the population in 2002 (Table 3).

Table 3. Literacy rate according to the 2002 Census.

Republic of North Macedonia	Literacy rate (%)					
	1994			2002		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
TOTAL	94,04	97,19	90,94	96,38	98,29	94,47

As evident from the Table 3, the Republic of North Macedonia has 3,62% illiterates older than 15. When compared to almost 6% of illiterates in 1994, it is a positive indicator. Nevertheless, we must emphasize that those data are gathered using incorrect methodology based only on the individual testimony of individuals about

⁶ State Statistical Office (2017). *Labor force survey 2017. Statistical review Population and social statistics*. 2.4.18.03.894 .

their educational level. Bearing in mind the data from the previous table (Table 2), we can conclude that the ratio of illiterate population is much higher than 3,62%.

Regarding the complex situation with literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia, there is the increased necessity for mutually coordinated and goal-oriented action of formal and non-formal sectors, i.e. close cooperation between educational institutions, local and central government, social partners and NGO's in order to reduce the number of illiterate people by including them in formal primary education in line with their age, work and life experience.

PAULO FREIRE'S LITERACY MODEL

The new and revolutionary approach to literacy introduced by Paulo Freire is seen as an antithesis of the old (and currently used) concept of "banking" or "bank education". According to Freire, education itself is suffering from a "narative" disease. This relation refers to the educator, who is a narrator and a subject in the educational process; and a "listener" who is the student seen as an object in the process. The educational content (which is part of this didactical triangulation) often becomes lifeless naration.

Educator's naration of the educator has a goal to "fill" the student's head with contents alienated from the reality, disconnected from the totality that gives meaning. Student's role is passive compared to "a container" - "a box" - that should be filled with contents by mechanical memorization. The more the educator succeeds to fill the containers, the better the educator he/she is. The more containers allow to be filled with the contents, the better students they will be (Freire, 2009: 72). Education thus becomes act of deposition, where an educator is the depositor and a student is the safety deposit box.

This "banking" concept of education is deducing student's role to being a passive object – a receiver and a keeper of information. The more the students are trying to memorize the deposits, the less developed the critical conuncnessness is. The more they accept the passive role that is imposed on them, the more inclined they become to adapt to the fragmented reality stored by the educators. Due to that kind of education, students become *homo objectus* instead of *homo rationalis* (Rizova, 2015).

In the Freire's literacy model, he insists on integrating *words* in literacy programs that will come from "word universe" of the people who learn, expressing their language, fears, needs and dreams. The words should be interrelated with the existential experience of the people who learn, not with the educator's experience. Only by exploring the "word universe" we can explore the word of "reading the world" of those who learn. *Language* is also one of the crucial elements in the Freire's literacy model. He pays special attention to the minority languages and emphasises that everyone should learn in their mother tongue (Freire, 1987: 151).

The didactical approach in the Paulo Freire's literacy model is mainly based on so called "*cultural circles*", which represent the opposite formation of formal educational institutions. The cultural circles are intended to help adult students to transfer from naïve to critical consciousness, instead of imposing ideas from the educator in a passive educational concept.

According to Freire, *critical literacy* implies an active participation of readers in the reading process. It focuses on the powerful relation between the reader and the text and promotes reflection, transformation and action (Freire, 2008). With the help of critical literacy people become capable of reflecting the written text, to suspect its accuracy, to search alternative explanations, all in the context of better understanding and internalizing the complex text (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

An educator has the crucial role in developing and nurturing critical literacy. Besides his role of mediator, facilitator and stimulator in the learning process, his main role is to teach adults to read and write their own reality by stimulating them to think critically about the world and to position themselves in that world with the increased and lucid consciousness about their changing reality. Freire rejected the hypothesis of purely mechanical literacy programs, and proposed a method that can help adults to cross from naïve to critical consciousness:

- through active dialogue, critical and critical-stimulative method;
- through changing the educational program contents;
- through applying teaching techniques for stimulating critical thinking.

That method is based on *dialogue* which, according to him, represents horizontal relation between individuals. It is opposite of anti-dialogue as vertical (superior) communication between individuals and presupposes equality between educator and students. Instead of the term teacher, in cultural circles Freire suggests the term educator; instead of lectures, there is dialogue; instead of alienated learning contents, he uses compact programs that are "codified" in learning lessons. In cultural circles adults learn through debating on areas that are suggested by themselves. Freire's literacy program and the literacy process itself is based on three elements:

- Method of *dialogue*, as stimulating method for developing critical consciousness;
- Changing *program contents* in the literacy process;
- Using techniques of thematically branching and codification of educational contents.

During the creation of the literacy programs, Freire suggests to start primarily from general and wide thematic areas that he names "generative themes" and that contain specific and more concrete thematic areas which will be elaborated later on through practical "codified" situations from everyday life. Literacy method of Paulo Freire is based on the problem-solving learning technique that corresponds to adult students' characteristics and learning styles, and does not include mechanical learning

of reading, writing and calculating skills. The process of “coding” the program contents presents the visual representation of one existential situation that shows several constitutive elements in interaction. Decoding, on the other hand, represents the analysis of the coded situation that adult students should solve through dialogue among themselves and the educator.

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary knowledge-based society, that represents a complex and dynamic social system, illiteracy is a challenge and the main inhibitor for development and prosperity that often reflects on personal progress and development of individuals.

Bearing in mind the situation with adult literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia, one of the main priorities in the country should be the inclusion of adults in primary education and literacy programs. Namely, in the past decade there were several activities, strategic, legal and operative documents focused on improving the situation with adult education as separate educational subsystem: Law for adult education, Strategy for education of the Republic of North Macedonia (2018-2025), Concept for primary adult education, etc.

However, as long as the treatment of problems with adult education are treated by non-experts and in a palliative way, the results will be discouraging. The issue of adult education is complex and requires a permanent and consistent treatment by all relevant stakeholders. That is why, illiteracy is still a challenge faced by both developed and developing countries, including the Republic of North Macedonia. Illiteracy represents the most suitable example of educational inequality and social exclusion, and when it is not addressed properly, it is impossible to expect significant progress in the field of adult education (Rizova, 2015).

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Didaktički pristup pismenosti: metoda Paula Freirea

Sažetak:

Stanje inercije međunarodnih nastojanja za povećanje pismenosti odraslih samo je jedan od pokazatelja nedostatka profesionalaca na međunarodnoj i nacionalnoj razini koji bi mogli analizirati, interpretirati i pojednostaviti ciljeve pismenosti odraslih, te ih oblikovati u obrazovne programe i aktivnosti u kojima bi mogli sudjelovati nepismeni odrasli. Postoji određena razlika između kreatora politike opismenjavanja, izvješća međunarodnih tijela i konferencija s jedne strane te praktičara koji rade na ovoj problematici s druge strane, a koji naglašavaju potrebu da visoko kvalificirani profesionalci tumače političku retoriku u odgovarajuće programe opismenjavanja. Jedno je sigurno, formalno osnovno obrazovanje odraslih ne zadovoljava obrazovne izazove “novih generacija”. Cilj je ovoga rada ispitati i prikazati koliko se uspješno prakticira model pismenosti Paula Freirea koji se kreće izvan konvencionalnih pristupa pismenosti (i didaktici), a prvenstveno se temelji na interesima odraslih i njihovim motivima za uključivanje u obrazovne aktivnosti. Rezultati pokazuju da je potrebno stvoriti i implementirati odgovarajući model pismenosti koji će srušiti barijere i ograničenja formalnoga obrazovanja i zastarjelih nastavnih metoda i tehnika. Zaključci i preporuke koje se nude u ovom radu ukazuju na buduće korake koje bi osnovno obrazovanje odraslih u Republici Sjevernoj Makedoniji trebalo poduzeti kako bi se iskorijenila nepismenost odraslih u zemlji te im pomoglo da se prilagode životu i radu.

Ključne riječi: pismenost, evolucija, kritičko mišljenje