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Anybody, anywhere,
anytime – reflections on
the pioneering work of Ana
Krajnc on opening learning
opportunities for adults

»People need knowledge to survive as badly as the air to breathe.«

Ana Krajnc (2012, p. 13)

Experiential learning

It is appropriate that colleagues from many countries wish to honour the remarkable achievements of an esteemed colleague and friend, Professor Ana Krajnc. Ana has been an inspiration to a great many of us from different spheres of life so, hopefully, by each of us contributing one small piece to the jigsaw, a fuller view will emerge of the contribution which she has made to the field of adult education – not just in Slovenia, but internationally.

For me there are two clear, interconnecting values which underlie her work. Firstly, a firm belief in the intrinsic value of education and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Secondly, a lifelong professional and personal commitment to working for access to education as a right for all – at all stages of life, and across all ages. In pursuit of both of these values she has been unstinting in her dedication through both her practice and research.

I had the great pleasure of meeting Ana in the course of on an OECD project, Adults in Higher Education. At the time, I was a (relatively junior) Lecturer in Adult and Community Education in Maynooth University, Ireland, where, with the support of Dr Hans Schuetze, OECD, and Dr Liam Carey, Maynooth University, we hosted a meeting of experts

on this theme. Ana was one of the keynote speakers at this event – memorable not only because of the quality of her thoughtful input, but also because unseasonably bad autumn weather necessitated a shopping expedition as Ana and I went hunting for some good Irish tweed clothes to keep her warm!

There are many themes which come to mind in reflecting on the continuing impact of Ana’s work. It is difficult to narrow the selection down, but here I would like to mention the two which, in my view, point to the foresight and contemporary relevance of her ideas.

- Conceptual contribution to the field of andragogy.
- Identification of older adults as a section of society with particular, but all too frequently neglected, educational interests and needs. I briefly address these below.

Conceptual contribution to the field of andragogy

In post-war Yugoslavia, mainly in response to labour market shortages, there was a new focus on providing education and training for the adult population. In this, it became evident that teaching adults – with their significant life and work experiences – required very different approaches to those used for teaching children in a compulsory school system – in terms of curriculum design, didactics, engagement, forms of assessment, scheduling and the like. In meeting the needs of these new types of learners, educators and other professionals required expert support and grounding in underlying principles, practices and research derived from the adult education tradition.

In 1956, the first lectures in what was termed ‘andragogy’ were delivered within the Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb University, leading to the establishment of the Chair of Andragogy in 1960. Ana, working at the Institute of Sociology, traces her decision to become engaged with the field of andragogy to her involvement with an international comparative study, Education of Adults, Social Mobility and Social Participation in 1967 (Krajnc, 2011). In 1971 Ana had the opportunity for a

one-year post-doctoral specialization at the Institute in Toronto, thus, on her return:

Professional and scientific literature augmented. Andragogy gained a place in the national research programme. (Krajnc, 2011, p. 48)

Lectures in General Andragogy and Andragogic Didactics commenced in Ljubljana University in the Faculty of Philosophy in 1972, and four years later the study of andragogy became a special course of study within the Department.

Andragogy has been defined as ‘the art and science of helping adults to learn and the study of adult education theory, processes, and technology to that end’ (Krajnc, 1989). Underpinning this approach lie principles influentially proposed by Malcolm Knowles (1970, 1984, 1989):

- adults are internally motivated and self-directed,
- adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences,
- adults are goal oriented,
- adults are relevancy oriented,
- adults are practical,
- adult learners like to be respected.

The field abounds with debates as to whether teaching adults is actually a distinctive area, or rather a specific application of good pedagogical practice. It is a measure of the continuing relevance of the concept that today a Google search for ‘images of andragogy vs pedagogy’ yields dozens of diagrams. This is at least one indicator of what practitioners describe, that teaching in a ‘classic’ adult education context is indeed very different to teaching in a formal, school environment.

Interestingly, in recent years, in the area of higher education the principles and approaches of andragogy, with modification, appear to be gaining some traction outside the ‘classic’ arena of adult education (Watson, 2015). Anecdotally at least, university adult educators are connecting with the Teaching and Learning Centres that have grown in strength in most European universities.

These debates will, of course, continue. To my mind, a major contribution Ana has made lies in the consistency of her practice, and it is here she demonstrates her core focus on the importance of experiential learning as key to the development of knowledge and skills.

Learning for, and with, older adults

Global trends point to significant increases in the proportions of older people in the populations of most European countries. As fertility rates fall and people live longer, the population aged 60 and over is growing at an increasing rate, which has been referred to by the UN as a global phenomenon of ‘population ageing’ (UN, 2015, p. 7). Achieving increasing longevity for many people is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable social and medical achievements of recent decades. However, all too often the accompanying narrative can be one of challenges associated with declining numbers of ‘productive’ age population in employment and associated pension and other ‘burdens’ for states (Slowey and Zubrzycki, 2018).

There has been a long tradition in the field of adult education and lifelong learning to offer an alternative narrative – one which emphasises the importance of providing educational opportunities for people across their entire lifespan, at all stages and ages, with a view to enhancing well-being (however defined) at the level of individuals and society. Just to take the UK, for example, to mention a few of the many people writing on this topic are colleagues such as John Field (2013), Brian Findsen (2011), Rob Mark (2013), Stephen McNair (2012), Tom Schuller (2015), Alex Withnall (2010), some of my own work (Slowey, 2008), plus many others too numerous to name here.

It is to this field that Ana’s work was far sighted and made (and continues to make) a significant contribution.

Her practice and her writing have emphasised the potential benefits, for example, of intergenerational learning, mentoring and peer tutoring (Krajnc, 2012). Here she has been particularly effective

in fostering the development of U3A, exemplifying many of the values and adult education approaches for which she is so well regarded.

Concluding reflections: cherry season in Slovenia

On a personal level, my most memorable encounter with Ana was when I was invited to contribute to one of the (justly famous) Slovenian adult education summer schools. Ana most kindly invited me to stay in her home in Ljubljana – sharing excellent Slovenian wine and bowlfuls of delicious cherries. This was a special experience for me as I saw at first hand the extraordinary care which she, and her equally dedicated colleagues from the University of Ljubljana and their other educational partners, put into the planning and running of this event.

They not only lectured about andragogic principles but put them into practice, not just responding, but anticipating, the diverse needs of the participants and with a strong focus on experiential learning. At the time (c2000) I was considering accepting a position from a university in New Zealand. My time at the summer school helped me to realise how difficult I would find it to be separated such a distance for a lengthy period of time from the heart of European developments ...

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