LIFELONG LEARNING.
ONLINE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract. The paper relates to the practical implementation of lifelong learning, and more closely to its effect related to subjective quality of life. Learning circles are known platforms of adult learning, and nowadays the main motivation of adults is typically to indulge in a certain topic – based on personal curiosity – in cooperation with others with similar interest. The challenges of the previous time period (Covid pandemic, energy crisis, etc.) more and more increase the value of online learning opportunities and community experiences. In this paper a needs assessment is presented on the interest in and demand on online study circles among adult responders, in the frame of a questionnaire research (n=318). Among the questions respondents were asked to give their expectations, and as a result, three types were to identified in the frame of factor analysis.

Keywords: learning circles; web 2.0. tools; online communities; adult learning; online learning; lifelong learning

Introduction

Digital technology is changing our lives, with the focus increasingly shifting to the user. The emergence and rapid development of ICT tools has widened the spaces and opportunities for learning and education, and supports the feedback, interactive and reflective nature of the learning process. Web 2.0 enables the creation of online communities on the Internet (Mark & Zi 2023). In our view, the inclusion of social networking sites in today's online learning environment also offers the potential to inspire learning communities. There is a large body of research showing that web-enabled services support collaborative knowledge building, online communities of shared interest (Adedoyin & Soykan 2023; Greenhow, Graham & Koehler 2022; Martin & Borup 2022; Xiaoqing et al. 2023). We formulated the following hypotheses in our research:

H1. The supposition is that people with positive experience in online learning space are more open to learning in an online learning circle than people without any experience, or than people with unfavorable learning experience in an online learning space.

H2. The supposition is that people with experience in learning in a community show more interest for community learning online.

In our research, we explored the main areas where self-directed knowledge building can take place. Learning circles in the beginning offered learning, education opportunities for those who had limited access to education. However, over time the circle of participants expanded, and different types, variations were formed (Åberg 2013; Karlsson 2012; Kaplan and Carré 2007; Larsson and Nordvall 2010; Pihlgren 2015, Richmond 2000; Simándi 2018). Since participation in learning circles is voluntary and is initiated by the participant himself, autonomous learning (Forray and Juhász 2009) was one of the starting points of the research. The referred research analyzed the mode of adult learning where learning is initiated by the student himself, where he goes after things that he can not remember well, checks his present knowledge, refreshes his previously acquired knowledge based on his own decision. This autonomous learning may be connected to his hobby as well as to his everyday life. In the aforementioned research on autonomous learning (Forray and Juhász 2009) the following learning platforms related to life situations and topics were identified, which were used in the present paper too. The platforms related to certain life situations and topics were as follows:

– Professional knowledge related to paid work
– Information related to information technology, use of computers, the Internet
– Foreign language
– Information related to household
– Knowledge related to health preservation, illnesses
– Information necessary for switching jobs, workplaces
– Information related to finances, taxation, legal issues
– Topics related to politics, history, social issues
– Religious, spiritual, esoteric topic
– Knowledge related to hobbies, leisure time activities
– Natural science topics
– Cultural, art knowledge, artistic activities
– Sports related learning
– Knowledge related to clothing, cosmetics, personal hygenie
– Knowledge related to agriculture, stock-raising, gardening

Presentation of the assessment

In our view, the inclusion of social networking sites in today's online learning environment also offers the potential to inspire learning communities. The online inquiry is justified by the fact that the topic to be examined is closely related to and builds on the use of the Internet. It can be regarded as a limit to the research that the questionnaire was shared primarily on social media pages, supplemented by sending it via e-mail. Not in the frame of probability sampling the link of the

questionnaire was sent via so called snowball sampling, that is the participants of the research were requested to share the questionnaire link with their acquaintances, friends, and to send it via e-mail as well. Thus, the intention was to ensure that the questionnaire would possibly reach not only people using social media. Our online questionnaire was filled out by 318 people altogether. Due to the procedure the results must be interpreted with care, however they will probably define directions that are worth to be examined in future researches.

The main topics of the questionnaire were:

– activities performed within the community,

– interest fields along the topics of the research titled Autonomous learning (Forray & Juhász 2009),

– experiences gained in online learning environment,

– expectations towards online learning circles,

– questions regarding self-regulated learning, etc.

Short presentation of the sample and some results of the assessment

The answers were analyzed in the frame of the SPSS program. Two-third of the respondents are female, and based on the age distribution four-tenth of the respondents belong to the under 30 age group, one-third to the 30 – 40 age group, and almost three-tenth belong to the age group over 40.

Respondents typically have a minimum of a high school diploma, one-third a higher education degree, one-tenth a technical school diploma. Nobody filled our questionnaire with lower school degree.

As for the place of residence of the respondents, one-tenth live in the capital, two-tenth in a regional district city, one-third in a village/town with under 10,000 inhabitants, in Hungary. 40 percent live in a settlement with over 10,000 inhabitants. As for marital status, more than half of the respondents live in partnership or marriage, one-third claimed themselves single. It can be stated about the participants that three-quarters use the Internet minimum two hours per day. As for the digital technology on a user level, half of the respondents consider themselves users of good level, one-quarter high level. Nine-tenth of the respondents can be considered social media user.

One-third of the participants is a member of some kind of community, in an in-person form they primarily belong to a community of culture and traditions or sports, in virtual form they mainly identified communities relating to their hobby.

To the question, what did they learn, what did they master in the given community, examples were given in relation to both in-person and virtual communities. Examples on community learning requiring in-person participation were given typically relating to dance (folk dancing, ballroom dancing, etc.), sports (basketball, handball, etc.), and hobby activities (amateur drama group, flower arranging, preparing scent pillows, etc.). In relation to online communities respondents mainly

identified practical everyday activities (taxation, first aid, child raising, cooking, etc.), and leisure time and hobby activities (exchange of experiences on motor repair, arts and crafts, sports betting, creative writing, etc.).

The research aimed to find out whether respondents were open to online learning opportunities. One-quarter of the respondents replied with a definite yes, four-tenth replied with openness (2.8) (1=not important at all, 4=absolutely important). Similarly to other researches openness to free learning was observed among participants with higher school degree (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,421).

We asked what expectations they set towards an online learning circle. Based on the answers, three-quarters of them fully expects that it provides experiential learning opportunity, is convenient for the exchange of experiences, and that it provides a knowledge expansion opportunity both in space and time. More than half of the respondents also have the expectation to be able to talk to people with similar interest. However, to form new friendships was marked as a less important aspect by more than four-tenth of the respondents.

The main reason to join a learning circle proved to be "*the interest for a topic that is interesting to me*", that is the choice of subject based on free choice and own interest (Larsson and Nordwall 2010). Knowledge usable in everyday life, which can be utilized at work, in ordinary life, or related to a certain hobby, can also be considered significant (Kindström 2000). Among people studying in higher education, it seems frequent to seek support in studies (sig: 0,000; V: 0,301). For almost half of the respondents it is also crucial who made the recommendation: in case of joining a learning circle the recommendation of acquaintances, friends – especially among women - seems to be a significant aspect (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,208). The fact that it is not set in place and time was attractive to the majority of the respondents. To the question what would they learn about with pleasure in an online learning circle – to which we used the platforms of the autonomous learning questionnaire (Forray and Juhász 2009), the following replies were received: respondents seem to be open mostly for practical knowledge that can be used in everyday life. It can be stated that marking the expansion of professional knowledge related to work is the highest among respondents with intellectual profession (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,521). Health preservation, healthy lifestyle can be considered topics of public interest nowadays, it was found typical among respondents above 40 years (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,702). Among female respondents a popular area seems to be the broadening of experiences on household and life skills. Topics primarily giving intellectual experience, relating to general knowledge (e.g., knowledge on culture, art; topics related to politics, history, social issues) are more popular among respondents with higher education (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,627). Therefore, as far as the topics in question are concerned, primarily present-oriented areas of interests were detected.

We wanted to know whether the respondents use, and if yes, how do they use the Internet for learning purposes. Half of the respondents use it, in terms of frequency, they mainly visit websites created for specific learning purposes, for example they search for educational videos, or applications that help language learning.

Learning through open courses can be considered low among the respondents (e.g., Open university, MOOC). More than half of the respondents who already took part in open courses considered their participation less successful. Among the reasons that are relevant to the present topic, were social relationships, as well as the lack of supportiveness of the other participants.

We also wanted to know how useful respondents consider social media portals (e.g. Facebook) for community learning, education: three-third gave positive answers.

There was almost a general consensus among the respondents that the effectiveness of the work in a learning circle is influenced by the number of participants. Respondents consider 5 to 20 participants to be effective, which corresponds with the experiences in Sweden (Kindström 2000).

We consider that in an online learning environment learning, education based on free choice, voluntary participation, requires the ability for self-regulated learning even more, such as matured interest, setting inner goals, realistic knowledge of own competencies and the love of learning, since personal responsibility of the participant gets a greater role. The question groups of the questionnaire compiled by Barnard and his colleagues on self-regulated learning to be used online (OSLQ: Online Self-regulated Learning Questionnaire) were compiled similarly to self-regulated learning abilities used in offline, home environment (goal setting; learning environment structuring; learning strategies; time management; help-seeking; self-evaluation.

Therefore, we took into consideration the above with questions on self-regulation (Barnard et al. 2009).

It was found that *"people with positive experience in online learning environment"* (it was examined whether the respondents use the Internet for learning purposes, took part in online, open courses, and considered the participation useful) according to their own statement they are open to other people's opinion (sig: 0,085; Cramer's V: 0,731); they have good time management, they can allocate their time well (sig: 0,010; Cramer's V: 0,671); are able to cooperate (sig: 0,029; Cramer's V: 0,451); and to set learning goals (sig: 0,021; Cramer's V: 0,572); and they enjoy learning (sig: 0,034; Cramer's V: 0,533), etc.

Based on the research data people who use the online platform for learning purposes, but at the same time expressed their need to learning support were designated *"people in need of support in online learning environment"*, that is they feel the need for guidance from an instructor/teacher during the learning process (sig: 0,003; Cramer's V: 0,255), need deadlines to be set (sig: 0,025; Cramer's V: 0,531), etc.

From the perspective of the topic of the paper this is important because only that learner (participant) will be capable of lifelong learning, and only that person will cleverly utilize the possibilities provided by informal learning platforms, who is skilled in learning methodology, and knows the main parameters of effective learning. Those without adequate capability for metacognition and self-regulation, will be able to profit little from the educational form offered by the online learning environment (Mark & Zi 2023).

Typology among the respondents

Based on the answers standardization of the respondents was attempted. During the analysis it was examined what do respondents consider important in case of an online learning circle, and it was established that based on the KMO and the Bartlett's Test these questions are appropriate for running the factor analysis. (The applicability of the factor analysis is also justified by the 0,733 middle value.) Based on the communalities, mobility had to be taken out of the research, therefore, this variable was disregarded during the rest of the analysis. The program created three factors, these together explain 61,453 percent of the variance, that is from the 9-dimension variable space was reduced to a three-dimension factor space, the explanatory power of which is over 60 percent. Along the motivations of adult learning, the first factor received the name 'learning related to work', since this factor is characterized by the broadening of knowledge useable at work, intellectual challenges. The base of the second factor (Community experiences, social relationships) is given by the experience of learning in community, talking to people of the same interest, or making new friendships. The third factor (Reaffirmation seeker) includes sharing of opinions, reaffirmation, the need for personal growth (Xiaoqing et. al 2023) (Table 1).

Table 1. Factors

	Components		
	Expansion, refreshment of knowledge	**Community experiences, social relationships**	**Seeking for reaffirmation, feed-back**
expansion of knowledge	,788		
exchange of experiences		,748	
learning through experience	,605		,701
new friendships, making new acquaintances		,791	

conversation with people with similar interests		,814	
seeking affirmation			,562
need for supportive feed-back			, 602
sharing opinion			,554
engrossment in a topic	,537		

(Sig: 0, 000)

The results formulated are primarily considered indicative, in our view online learning circles fulfil the following needs among others:

Learning related to work (professional growth)

43% of the respondents belong here. As for their age, more than half of them are under 40 (sig: 0,002; Cramer's V: 0,301), as for their education, mainly they have a higher degree, or are currently studying at a higher education institution (sig: 0,013; Cramer's V: 0,255). One-fourth of them has experience in online learning environment, has participated in an open course, or uses the Internet for learning purposes: for example for language learning. Their field of interest trend mainly to the expansion of professional knowledge related to paid work (sig: 0,011; Cramer's V: 0,856), or to the practice of foreign languages (sig: 0,014; Cramer's V: 0,325), that is their field of interest can be considered present-oriented, and is mainly related to work (Larsson and Nordwall 2010).

Community experience learning (social relationships)

38% of the respondents belong here. As for their age, one-fourth of them are under 30, one-third of them are between 40 and 50, as for their education, they mainly own a general certificate of education (sig: 0,011; Cramer's V: 0,425). Their field of interest is characterized by seeking topics related to leisure activities, such as learning related to hobbies, sports (sig: 0,010; Cramer's V: 0,419), in addition they marked practical areas, areas related to household and lifestyle. As for their marital status, the number of singles is the highest in this group (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,753). Their field of interest can also be considered present-oriented, they are mostly open to topics useable in everyday life. The social function of learning circles seems to be the most important for this group (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,567), which can also ean communication platform for them: they help the formation of new relationships, new groups as the tool of formation of social relationships (Kolland 2011).

Feed-back seekers (personal growth)

The third type was named feed-back seeker, since they were the ones who mainly expressed their need for supportive feed-back (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,665). One-fifth of the respondents belong here. As for their age, almost half of them are between 31 – 40, one-third of them are between 41 – 50. They are open to learning, education, but they prefer experiential, informal learning opportunities (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,249), they don't like or they are less interested in formal learning environments. They seek topics enriching general knowledge (politics, history, culture, arts, natural science, foreign language, etc.), in a relaxed environment. For people belonging to this group learning circles can offer the broadening of their minds, the possibility to express their opinion and dispute (Kindström 2000).

Conclusions and summary

Feed-back gained in the frame of the needs assessment may lead to the conclusion that there is an interest for online learning circles, which is significant both from the aspect of lifelong learning (LLL) and life wide learning (LWL). In summary, the hypothesis according to which people with positive experience in online learning environment are more open to learning in online learning circles (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,211) than people without any experience (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,301), or people with unfavorable learning experience in online learning environment (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,243) (H1), seems to be justified. (Experience gained in online learning environment here means: the respondent uses the Internet for learning purposes, he already expanded his knowledge by educational videos, open courses or language learning applications.) The hypothesis that people who have learning, educational experience based on personal participation or in an online/virtual community are more open to online learning circles (H2), was found justified as well (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,223). It was found that people who are members (or were previously members) of different communities, show more interest (they have 4 on the four-point scale) towards online learning circles (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,121), and marked the social function of community learning (belonging to a community, community experiences, social relationships) in a higher proportion (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V: 0,208).

This also proves that the chosen topic may be related to general knowledge, to a person's lifestyle, to his hobby activity, professional interest, life situation, or even to his local community.

NOTES

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