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Learning literacy. Why adults learn differently and how media matter

Andrzejewska, Ewa [Hrsg.]; Matthes, Eva [Hrsg.]; Schütze, Sylvia [Hrsg.]; Wiele, Jan van [Hrsg.]: Bildungsmedien für Erwachsene. Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2024, S. 25-36. - (Beiträge zur historischen und systematischen Schulbuch- und Bildungsmedienforschung)

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Learning Literacy
Why Adults Learn Differently and How Media Matter

Abstract
*Der Beitrag untersucht die Bedeutung eines spezifischen, aus der Pädagogik der Aufklä-
rung stammenden Erwachsenen-Ideals für Erwachsenenbildung und Bildungsmedien: des
Ideals des selbstständigen, medienbasierten Lernens im Erwachsenenalter. Ausgehend
von einer historischen Betrachtung der Formierung dieses Ideals gegen Ende des 18.
Jahrhunderts wird Erwachsenenbildung als eine Praxis des Umgangs mit dem Umstand
interpretiert, dass die in der Welt lebenden realen Erwachsenen an diesem Ideal gemessen
werden, ohne dass sie ihm jemals vollständig entsprechen könnten. Ausgehend von dieser
Deutung werden vier in der Gegenwart bedeutsame Varianten von Erwachsenenbildung
und entsprechend vier Arten von Bildungsmedien für Erwachsene beschrieben.*

Is there anything that makes adults' learning different from learning in other stages of
development? And, if so, what is the difference? This question is a key issue in the theory
and practice of adult education because, depending on how it is answered, educational
efforts will be shaped and oriented quite differently. Also, the design and evaluation of
educational media for adults depends on how we understand adult learning.

A great variety of characterizations of adulthood have been proposed and, accordingly, a
multitude of distinctive features of adult learning have been discussed (Dinkelaker, 2018).
In this paper, I am going to focus on only *one* of these possible ways of specifying adult
learning, which could be termed "learning literacy". This notion of adultness starts from a
decidedly educational view of adulthood and is therefore particularly helpful, when it
comes to understand the role of media in adult learning.

I will begin with a swift overview of ways of approaching 'adultness'. Following on, I
will present a definition of 'adult' which derives from a decidedly educational point of
view (chapter 1).

To further explore this definition, I will take a closer look at the historical constellation in
which this concept of adulthood has been formed: the bourgeois reading revolution of the
late 18th century. The ideal of adulthood formed in this period contains the expectation of
ongoing self-determined efforts in learning: being an adult means to constantly learn on
one's own by making use of and referring to media (chapter 2).

The concept of adults as literate, self-reflective learners was originally conceived within a
small community, but has since spread and become a dominant societal expectation for all
individuals of legal age. The practice of adult *education* – the efforts undertaken to foster
adult learning – is founded on the fact that the ideal of the self-learning adult differs from
how adults actually relate to their learning and to media. We can categorize adult education

into four distinctive types by asking how the educational efforts are related to the unful-filled ideal of adult learning (chapter 3).

This allows, as a conclusion, to discuss the question of how and why media matter within adult learning and what role *educational* media play (chapter 4).

1. What defines adulthood from an educational point of view?

While we can find profound and differentiated contributions to "childhood studies" or "gerontology", the field of "adulthood studies" is noticeably missing (Dinkelaker & Kade, 2013; Fangmeyer & Mierendorff, 2017; Holms, 2018; Stroß, 2000). The adult state seems to be the taken-for-granted 'normal' of the various human life stages. Yet, our notions about what adults are and have to be, cannot be taken for granted at all: they have been shaped by history and undergo ongoing transformations. What constitutes adulthood is constantly negotiated and intertwines with the evolving dynamics of society.

Within modern societies we can observe that adulthood functions as a generalized status, which is equally ascribed to all members reaching a certain chronological age (Seitter, 2000). This status is associated with certain rights and obligations which are founded on the ideal that adults are to be autonomous in their decisions as long as they can justify them in rational deliberations.

The concept of adulthood is shaped quite differently depending on the context in which it is specified and institutionalized (see fig. 1). In the context of law, for example, adults are constructed as people who are

law	accountabilty
economy	freedom of contract - self-supporting/employable
politics	eligibility to vote - participate in public deliberations
medicine	descendants - ageing
education	???

Fig. 1   Context-specific definitions of adulthood (own representation)

permitted and expected to decide for themselves and therefore can be held accountable for their actions. In the context of economics, adults are not only persons who have full competencies to enter into contracts, but they are also expected to be self-supporting, usually by participating in labour markets. In the political sphere, adults are expected to participate in public deliberations. They are eligible to vote and to be elected. Beyond these ideas of adulthood deriving from concepts of *moral* maturity, there are also social contexts in which *bodily* maturity takes centre stage, such as in sports and medicine, partly also in psychology. The concept of bodily maturity is not only associated with the expectation of sexual reproduction but also with that of progressive ageing. Beyond that, further notions of adulthood develop within the common sense of everyday life, such as that shown in Figure 2.

ADULTHOOD

"IF YOU'RE NOT TIRED, YOU'RE NOT DOING IT RIGHT."

Fig. 2   A cartoon from the internet (Claribel, 2015)

In sum, we can see that there are multiple definitions of adulthood which have developed in different social and professional contexts. A closer look at these context-related specifications shows that the demands and possibilities arising from them often differ substantially – and even conflict in some areas.

All of these definitions of adulthood can be applied to the question of what characterizes adult learning. And they are applied: adult learning is seen as the learning of those who are legally independent and as the learning of those who are expected to participate in the labour market (Dehnbostel, 2009) and to enter into contracts. Adults are expected to learn while participating in democratic practices (Voßkuhle, 2019), and taking responsibility for the development of following generations (Frank, 2010). Adult learning is also seen as the learning of those whose fluid learning capabilities increasingly degenerate, while their crystallised intelligence may still increase (Baltes et al., 1999).

Fig. 3   Adulthood as an educational goal (own representation)

All these facets of adulthood are relevant when considering how educational media matter for adults. However, there is one way of defining adulthood which I consider as being decisive for an adequate understanding of what constitutes adult learning and adult education in the present, and this notion of adultness was formed within the context of education. When we turn to educational theory in our quest to define adulthood, we make a rather intriguing observation. Typically, the concept of adulthood is not employed to describe the characteristics of adults themselves, but rather to delineate the developmental goals of what children should be educated *for*. As long as education is primarily aimed at children and youth, adulthood marks the end of these efforts. Adulthood is seen as the embodiment of what people should become when they are successfully educated (Fangmeyer & Mierendorff, 2017). This goal provides a foundation for educational practices even though it is obvious that such educational efforts will not be successful in each and every case.

Fig. 4   Adult education as education of the educated (own representation)

While the idea of adults being the educated version of humans seems to be quite natural, educational theory encounters significant challenges when attempting to establish educational efforts for adults based on this notion of adulthood (Dinkelaker, 2021). Should adults be treated as if they were already well educated – that is, as adults? If so, why then is there any need for further education? Or should they be treated as if they needed further education in order to become fully mature? If so, then do these people actually qualify as adults? And how can we speak of *adult* education? This forms the basic paradox of any kind of adult education which arises from the fact that the concept of adulthood is an ideal and no ideal ever fully

corresponds to the real world. Adult education is the social practice in which these tensions between adulthood as an idealized concept, and adulthood as a lived experience, are negotiated and reflected (Dinkelaker & Wyßuwa, 2023). We can, however, observe different ways of approaching these tensions. Before we have a closer look at them, I just want to go into a little more detail about how this ideal of the well-educated adult has been formed in modern societies.

2. The formation of the modern ideal of self-determined media-based adult learning

Contemporary studies on adult learning no longer start from discussions about how learning should take place; they usually rely on empirical observations of *how* actual adult learning takes place (Dinkelaker, 2018). Yet, this does not mean that research on learning ideals is no longer relevant. On the contrary, we can see that within the situated accomplishment of adult learning and adult education, ideals play a critical role because the participants in adult learning events are oriented towards them. Therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at how ideals of adult learning are structured. As we can see in history, idealizations of adult learning have changed repeatedly. I am going to look at only one state of this idealization, one which was formed during the beginnings of modern society in the context of the social group termed 'bourgeoisie'. I will argue that this ideal still serves as the foundational framework for contemporary practices in adult learning and adult education.

In order to look more closely at the formation of this ideal at the end of the 18th century, I use the example of developments within the German-speaking countries, starting with a quote from an 1805 book by Heinrich Stephani titled *System der öffentlichen Erziehung* ("System of Public Education") which offered a comprehensive concept of how the state should take care of the education of its citizens. This book not only refers to education of the youth, but also to the education of adults or, in the words of the author, "den volljährigen Teil der Nation" ("the part of the nation being of legal age"). Stephani opens his chapter about Leseanstalten ("reading institutions") with the following words:[1] "Every adult human should not only strive to preserve their acquired education, but also to increase it throughout the rest of their life" (Stephani, 1805, p. 199; transl. from German into English by J.D.).

This quote is quite remarkable. First of all, we witness the use of the term 'adult' in reference to educational efforts which is quite unusual for this time. In fact, it was not until the 1920s that the term 'adult education' was coined in the German literature. Before this, terms such as popular education (Volksbildung) or workers education (Arbeiterbildung) were common (Seitter, 2001). In the context of Stephani's book, however, the term 'adult' was necessary to indicate a specific group of individuals who shared one common characteristic: they had been educated in schools, but were no longer being educated there. Second, this quote is remarkable because it refers to the idea that efforts have to be made in order to sustain and increase the knowledge and understanding of such adults. As we can see here, the concept of lifelong learning is not at all an invention of the early 1970s or the

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[1] „Jeder erwachsene Mensch soll nicht nur seine empfange Bildung zu erhalten, sondern auch sein übriges Leben hindurch zu vermehren suchen" (Stephani, 1805, p. 199).

late 1990s, as is often claimed nowadays (Hof, 2022; Kraus, 2001). Third, it is remarkable in that it takes for granted that the ongoing learning of adults is based on media practices, is realized by reading, and that this reading can be fostered by establishing reading rooms. This seems quite puzzling, since the school attendance rates were relatively low at this time. In Prussia, for example, less than 60 percent of the population attended school at the beginning of the 19th century. Building libraries to foster adult learning *for all* does not seem to be an appropriate measure. This points to the visionary status of the proposed concept. Stephani drafts the blueprint of an ideal system of education, in which all persons of legal age are educated literates and in which any adult seeks to renew and enhance their education.

According to this concept, adults are *not at all* defined by the fact that they have stopped learning or that they no longer need to learn (Pöggeler, 1964). In fact, adults are defined by the very opposite – that they are constantly learning and doing it on their own without specific need for assistance. This necessarily implies that they are able to read and to reflect on what they have read. Within the last 200 years, great efforts have been made towards a realization of this ideal. Rates of school attendance and literacy have increased, and are still increasing worldwide. Media-based practices of self-determined adult learning have been developed, libraries have been built and new ways of accessing knowledge and information have emerged – not least the internet as the new universal media access point. However, the ideal of self-determined learning of all adults remains unachieved. I would like to argue that this is not because there has not been considerable progress in this regard, but because the ideal is an *ideal*, and therefore in the real world, it can only ever be approached or approximated, but never reached to its full extent. This argument has fundamental consequences for how we think about adult learning and about adult education.

Let us have a closer look at what constitutes this idealized notion of self-determined media-based adult learning. It was shaped within a small and very specific social group consisting of well-educated men in reputable professions. The emergence of this ideal itself was linked to a new media practice in which critical reading and individual reasoning were nurtured as key virtues. The leading media of this practice was the journal. In Germany, for example, there was an explosive expansion of new journals in the second half of the 18th century. While there were 100 titles in 1750, between the 1770s and the 1790s 2,000 titles were listed (Matuschek, 2015, p. 335). And, everybody who wanted to be acknowledged as taking part in the progress of humanity wanted to read what was

Fig. 5   Reading chamber. Painting by Johann Peter Hasenclever (1843). Quelle: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Das_Lesekabinett#/media/Datei:Johann_Peter_Hasenclever_Lesekabinett_1843.jpg

written in these journals. Because it was quite expensive to subscribe to them, local literates joined reading circles, establishing places where the journals could be stored and

accessed. Although the picture in Figure 5 was painted half a century after such reading rooms had been established, it gives a good impression of how reading in such associations was practiced. The painting also shows that these associations were only for people with masculine attributes. The picture also shows that reading was a public event. Readers came together, not only to read, but also to discuss what they read, and even to interact beyond that, for example, the chess match going on in the background. Social interaction was established and cultivated around the reading material, and clubs and salons became distinguished venues where such writing was discussed (Losfeld, 2015). Beyond that, the journals themselves were staged as places of interaction: readers were encouraged to submit their own texts as well as to send in questions to which other readers would reply. This social media practice was considered as a public reasoning on how the common challenges of human development could be addressed through rational deliberations. The notable motto was "enlightenment". What this could mean was also debated within these deliberations. In one journal, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, for example, a reader asked "Was ist Aufklärung?" ("What is enlightenment?") and several others sent in answers to be published in later editions. One of these replies – written by a professor called Immanuel Kant – was so consequential that it is still read in schools today. I do not want to go into Kant's text in detail, but to highlight one point, which is relevant for the purpose we follow here: the nexus of adult learning as reading as well as writing.

Berlinische Monatsschrift.

1784.

Zwölftes Stük.   December.

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I.

Beantwortung der Frage:
Was ist Aufklärung?

(S. Decemb. 1783. S. 516.)

Fig. 6 Title page of *Berlinische Monatsschrift*

Kant starts his article with the assertation, that enlightenment means having the courage to use one's own reasoning ("Sapere aude!"). He then emphasizes that this endeavour cannot be successful when it is pursued alone, but only when there is social interaction in which the participants publicly discuss each other's views with the use of rational arguments. The audience imagined within this public reasoning is primarily a *reading* public:[2] "However, by the public use of one's own reason, I mean the use that someone, as an educated person, makes of it before the entire reading public" (Kant, 1784, p. 485; transl. from German into English by J.D.).

The idea of an ongoing progress in moral maturity by means of public reasoning and deliberation is ultimately linked to this specific practice of reading, writing and discussing the written which was established in the late 18th century.

Although this practice was highly valued, it was also highly dependent on preconditions: only men who were able to read and write, and thus capable of staying up to date, could take part. Although, at first, this meant that only a very small group of people could take part, because the ideal of enlightenment and self-reasoning could not be limited to only a small group without being self-contradictory, efforts were made in order to change people and their worlds instead of focussing on the ideal. The 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries were characterized by tremendous educational efforts which aimed to disseminate

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[2] „Ich verstehe aber unter dem öffentlichen Gebrauch seiner eigenen Vernunft denjenigen, den jemand als Gelehrter von ihr vor dem ganzen Publikum der Leserwelt macht" (Kant, 1784, p. 485).

this idea of educated adulthood so that it could be applied to everyone of legal age. Massive investments in popular education were directed at establishing the conditions in which the adultness of adult learning could be realized. What we see today as the state of adult learning and the state of education can be read as the impressive, but also ambivalent, outcome of these efforts.

3.   Ways of addressing the difference between the adult learning ideal and the actual learning of adults

Let us have a look at the contemporary practices of adult education. They can all be interpreted as ways of dealing with the tension between the Enlightenment's ideal of adult learning and the real learning activities of adults. Starting from this assumption, four means of dealing with the differences between the ideal and the real adult learning can be distinguished: they can be neglected, contained, overtly addressed or the ideal can be undermined.

3.1 Neglecting

A large portion of the efforts aiming to foster adult learning implies the *neglection* of the differences between the ideal of the self-informing critical adult learner and the real-life learning experiences of adults. They assume that the individuals involved align with this ideal even though this cannot be true in every case. Such efforts focus on building, maintaining and improving the infrastructures needed for the collective self-education of adults. This includes not only the accessibility of relevant literature, but also the arrangement of events in which exchanges can take place. Beyond the upkeeping of libraries, establishment of community centres, and organization of discussion events, adult education guided by this approach also involves introducing relevant topics, initiating new debates and raising thought-provoking questions. In this sense, a large part of our cultural, professional and scientific life has to be understood as adult education and, accordingly, most of the media produced have to be seen as educational media.

Acting as if adult learners are adults in their learning is a very powerful approach, yet neglecting the gap between the real and the ideal also results in severe problems. The most obvious consequence is that of exclusion. People who are not interested in, or are not able to, learning in the expected self-directed manner will either make no effort at all to pay attention to debates, they may refrain from raising their voices or they may be prevented from taking part in the relevant deliberations. Another consequence, which is not so obvious, but may be even more serious, is that people take part in these collective learning activities only pretending to, or assuming, that they really understand what is being discussed. In Germany, the term 'Halbbildung' (semi-educated) was coined to address this issue at the beginning of 20th century. In the 1950s, Theodor Adorno used this term to reflect the conditions of the rise of national socialism within his critique of cultural industry giving easy and comforting access to cultural goods for everybody (Adorno, 1959). Adorno argues that such 'Halbbildung' is much worse than ignorance or illiteracy, as pretending to possess knowledge obstructs any potential for further learning and critical thinking.

Both consequences – exclusion from as well as perversion of adult learning – are considerable reasons for making *additional* educational efforts, of which the most popular one is that of containing the gap between the ideal and the real to partial, and therefore manageable, educational challenges.

3.2 Containment

The problem with overtly handling the gap between the expected and actual conditions of participating in adult self-education is that of saving face. As soon as adults are seen as lacking competencies, their adult status is open to being contested. As this status is a prerequisite of participating in professional and economic as well as in cultural and political life, overt ignorance threatens the face of people who are addressed in this manner. One way of containing this threat is limiting it to a specific, discernible domain of learning. As long as the topic to be addressed concerns something to which the participating adults

Fig. 7   Introducing adults into new publics (own representation)

have yet to be exposed and are to be newly introduced, the adult status of the participants is not really in danger. They can be addressed as persons who are intrinsically interested in extending their previously gained education. Such efforts in adult education which aim to enhance the individual range of accessible subject matters, ma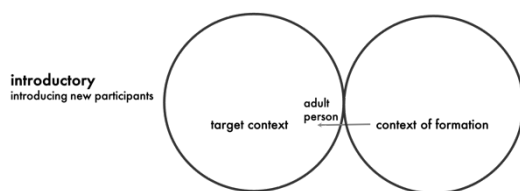y be interpreted either in an *introductory* or in a *translational* manner (Dinkelaker, 2024). Within the *introductory* approach (Fig. 7), the participants are addressed as novices within the related domain of expertise. As they are entering a new public they have to learn how to take part adequately in the content-specific discussions. The educational efforts consist of pointing out the relevance of this context of knowledge to the new participants. Within the

Fig. 8   Translating knowledge (own representation)

translational approach (Fig. 8), the participants are addressed as persons who already competently participate in specific publics. The educational efforts refer to the problem that knowledge which has been developed in another public – such as a scientific discipline or a professional domain – is to be transferred to the context in which the addressed adults are involved. The educational work consists of pointing out the relevance of the transferred knowledge within the addressed public and enabling discussions about its consequences.
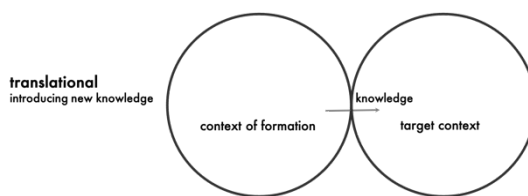
Both approaches have their pros and cons. The translational approach allows the participants to be seen as equitable counterparts within their context, but implies their exclusion from taking part in the public from which the knowledge is transferred. The introductory approach, on the other hand, allows the participants to become members of the content-related publics but begins by addressing them as uneducated novices and therefore temporarily questions their adult status. While the translational approach has the disadvantage

of potentially keeping the addressed adults dependent on knowledge which is produced and discussed elsewhere, the introductory approach's weakness is that it may devalue the developed competencies and insights which participants bring with them.

3.3 Overtly addressing

The third method of addressing divergences between the ideals of adult learning and factual learning practices is both the most face threatening and, at the same time, the most profound. Within this approach, adults are openly addressed as people who do not match fundamental expectations related to their learning literacy. This overt ascription of ignorance and incompetence not only questions their adult status, but also opens up the possibility of explicitly addressing the learning challenges, which have to be met.

The most popular examples of this approach are adult literacy programmes. In the context of the United Nations World Literacy Decade, low levels of adult literacy have been addressed not only in countries with ill-developed school systems, but also in those countries in which basic literacy is taken for granted. Large-scale assessments in Germany, for example, revealed that functional illiteracy is widespread (Grotlüschen & Riemann, 2011): every seventh adult is unable to read or write to the standard that would allow them to participate in self-determined adult learning. These findings have been employed to support initiatives that invest significant resources to address such adults. However, these programmes have repeatedly reported that it is difficult to persuade people to take part as this would mean overtly admitting that they are unable to function in the manner taken for granted for adults. As a result, few of those lacking literacy are brave enough to openly admit and address their learning needs. Observations of what happens in these literacy classrooms show that the risk of being infantilized is high, not least because the material which is used for the training is often taken or adapted from educational media for children. However, leaving this effort undone would mean perpetuating the exclusion of this large group of adults from adult learning. Beyond that, it is not only reading and writing in the narrow sense of the words that are challenges for critical learning literacy. As we can see by the actual digitalization dynamics, *any* new media brings new demands in literacy – and not all of these demands can be handled by all adults on their own.

3.4 Undermining

The downside of the ideal of the literate adult learner is the devaluation of practical learning, referring not to the written, but to oral knowledge. Anthropologist Jack Goody emphasizes this in his study, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*: "Indeed 'knowledge' and 'science' have become almost synonymous with book-learning, to be distinguished from most productive activities which are largely learned by apprenticeship, by imitation, by participation" (1987, p. 165).

Such practical education has always been a considerable part of how adults learn. And many adult education activities still rely on non-book knowledge. In fact, in many of these endeavours, the notion of the literate adult is even explicitly rejected in favour of fostering unmediated and authentic experiences. Hands-on learning activities are often positioned as a complementary counterpart to book-based learning, seen as a means to address the shortcomings of media-based education (Dewey, 2015/1916). Yet, even these practical education activities are immersed in a rich tapestry of media resources providing knowledge and guidance. Practical education may offer something like a corrective to the flaws

of media-based education but, obviously, it cannot establish learning spaces beyond the realities of media (Luhmann, 1996).

4   How educational media matter

As shown thus far, adult education can be described by starting from the assumption that self-determined media-based adult learning may not take place without specific efforts (Dinkelaker, 2013). Adult education can be legitimized by a need for specific cultural infrastructures. Education for adults can be seen as necessary, when new participations shall be introduced in existing publics or when knowledge shall be transferred from one public to another. Adult education can be founded on the purpose of enabling adult literacy. And, finally, it can be established with an emphasis on practical learning beyond book knowledge. Each of these four types of legitimizing adult education implies a specific relevance of educational media for adults.

4.1 Media as generic infrastructure
While any kind of media can be of educational worth in the sense of being an infrastructure for adult learning, obviously not all media are oriented to the ideal of the collective self-education of adult learners. What does this mean for educational efforts? We can derive two different kinds of educational efforts from this. The first is that of the critical observation of media and the close scrutiny of how they relate to adult learners and their adulthood. Second, educational efforts can lead into designing media with the intent to contribute to a vast infrastructure for collective adult self-education.

4.2 Media supporting knowledge acquisition
Media aimed at introducing existing topics to new publics or new people to existing publics can be a specific part of this learning infrastructure. As shown above, such efforts can be framed in either an introductory or a translational manner. Educational media with an introductory orientation aim to furnish newcomers with what they have to know and consider in order to take part in the relevant public. Fundamental tensions arise here between the need to address the readers as being critically literate and the need to guide them in order to point them to those aspects of the topic to which they will be introduced (Dinkelaker, 2022). Educational media following a translational approach have to meet the challenge of representing the translated ideas and debates in a way that allows the audience to critically consider the relevance of the implied arguments for the addressed contexts. The fundamental tension that arises here is between the demand of being true to the original knowledge on the one hand, and that of adapting the translation to the specific network of relevance which constitutes the target context on the other (Dinkelaker & Wenten, 2024).

4.3 Media as working material for literacy training
As I have already pointed out using the case of reading and writing, there is a specific need for materials with which adults can improve their (learning) literacy. Even though learners being addressed in such media may not match all of the fundamental expectations of their adult status, they still have to be treated as adults. The media have to address them as self-

reflecting critical learners and, at the same time, enable them to become such. This is true not only for basic literacy, but for all other domains of literacy – for example, material with which coding can be learnt or the use of software applications (Verständig, 2022).

4.4 Media as guidance for practical learning

An especially interesting case of educational media for adults are media providing knowledge and guidance for practical learning. Their paradoxical intention is to overcome the dominance of media-based learning and open up practical and authentic experiences by providing media guidance. Even though, this is contradictory, it is possible. Media can provoke actions in the real world and point to aspects of practical conduct which are relevant for lived experience. Yet, it is also possible that such media products may hinder authentic experiences, even when they are aimed at fostering them.

Either way, educational media which refers to practical learning is part of a trend which has been prevalent from the start of modern society: the mediatization of social practices. As soon as practical knowledge is discussed in media, multiple versions of these descriptions become accessible and comparable, and this leads to debates about which approach should be accepted (Goody, 1987). Media aiming to promote practical learning necessarily pushes the theoretisation of social practices.

It has to be considered, that all these described means of adult education, all these ways of dealing with the tension between the ideal of critically literate adult learning and the real learning activities of adults, build together a horizon against which adult learners have to make sense of their own learning. The actual learning of adults takes place under the condition of the historically developing ideals of adulthood and the educational efforts to address their barriers and flaws. The considerations above may help to analyse these conditions of adult learning.

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