

Hessische Blätter für Volksbildung

Didaktik der Zukunft
– Zukunft der Didaktik?!

Erwachsenenbildung

vhs hessischer
Volkshochschulverband

wbv

E-Journal Einzelbeitrag
von: Magnus Schoultz

Didaktik for older adults

aus: Didaktik der Zukunft – Zukunft der Didaktik?! (HBV2601W)
Erscheinungsjahr: 2026
Seiten: 21 - 29
DOI: 10.3278/HBV2601W003

This paper critiques the concept of lifelong learning and its tendency to narrow our view of learning and education for older adults. Drawing on two academic traditions, the Anglo-American curriculum tradition and the German-Nordic Didaktik tradition, the paper shows how lifelong learning risks emphasising the learning process at the expense of educational content. To address this, I propose Didaktik theory as a fundamentally different approach to understanding education for seniors. Didaktik Theory offers valuable theoretical insights into how older adults' non-formal education develops. The paper illustrates that teachers' opinions on older adults' learning do not match the idea of lifelong learning.

Schlagnote: Didaktik; Older adults; Education; Lifelong learning; ältere Erwachsene; Bildung; Lebenslanges Lernen
Zitiervorschlag: Schoultz, Magnus (2026). *Didaktik for older adults*. *Hessische Blätter für Volksbildung*, 76(1), 21-29. Bielefeld: wbv Publikation. <https://doi.org/10.3278/HBV2601W003>



Didaktik for older adults

MAGNUS SCHOULTZ

Abstract

This paper critiques the concept of lifelong learning and its tendency to narrow our view of learning and education for older adults. Drawing on two academic traditions, the Anglo-American curriculum tradition and the German-Nordic Didaktik tradition, the paper shows how lifelong learning risks emphasising the learning process at the expense of educational content. To address this, I propose Didaktik theory as a fundamentally different approach to understanding education for seniors. Didaktik theory offers valuable theoretical insights into how older adults' non-formal education develops. The paper illustrates that teachers' opinions on older adults' learning do not match the idea of lifelong learning.

Keywords: Didaktik; Older adults; Education; Lifelong learning

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag kritisiert das Konzept des lebenslangen Lernens und seine Tendenz, unsere Sicht auf Lernen und Bildung im höheren Erwachsenenalter zu verengen. Unter Bezugnahme auf zwei akademische Traditionen – die anglo-amerikanische Curriculum-Tradition und die deutsch-nordische Didaktik-Tradition – zeigt der Beitrag, wie das Konzept des lebenslangen Lernens dazu neigt, den Lernprozess auf Kosten der Bildungsinhalte zu betonen. Um diesem Problem zu begegnen, schlage ich die Didaktiktheorie als einen grundlegend anderen Ansatz zum Verständnis von Bildung im Alter vor. Die Didaktiktheorie bietet wertvolle theoretische Einsichten in die Entwicklung non-formaler Bildung älterer Erwachsener. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass die Ansichten von Lehrenden über das Lernen älterer Erwachsener nicht mit der Idee des lebenslangen Lernens übereinstimmen.

Stichwörter: Didaktik; ältere Erwachsene; Bildung; Lebenslanges Lernen

1 Lifelong learning as an economic tool

In today's society, education and learning are often seen as pursuits primarily for younger people to become responsible citizens. Education should equip individuals with qualifications that lead to future jobs or employment. As new challenges arise, other social groups have also become engaged with learning and education. Through the concept of lifelong learning, the research field of adult education has increasingly focused on older adults' learning. Lifelong learning is not a new concept; initially, it highlighted values such as social justice and power distribution. Today, however, the idea is more often associated with technological advancements and economic factors. Modern society can be described as a knowledge-based society, where knowledge is regarded as a key driver of success and prosperity. The European Union (EU) has progressively emphasised the importance of lifelong learning in recent years (Biesta 2021). As nations seek to lead their own development, lifelong learning is viewed as a tool for economic growth. Countries face emerging economic challenges related to technological innovations and demographic changes. In this context, lifelong learning is seen as a way to address these forthcoming shifts (Biesta 2021). When the focus of learning and knowledge is to develop skills that benefit both individuals and society, it is often seen primarily as an economic resource.

Formosa (2012) criticises how learning among older adults is depicted in policy documents on lifelong learning, arguing that too much emphasis has been placed on technical skills and employability. Lifelong learning is highlighted as a crucial aspect of promoting active ageing. Active ageing is a core concept in EU policy, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) has recognised it as an essential part of efforts to foster active ageing, stressing the significance of learning for health and well-being in older age. WHO's policy framework, *Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030*, emphasises learning as a vital element for healthy ageing, supporting older adults in maintaining their autonomy and independence (WHO 2020). Withnall (2022) points out that policy documents stress lifelong learning for older adults in relation to economic and social advantages and health promotion. However, viewing lifelong learning for older adults mainly as a means to achieve economic goals can be problematic.

The intense focus on lifelong learning risks highlighting specific issues while neglecting discussions on educational content. To explore this, I will examine two academic traditions in the next section: the Anglo-American curriculum tradition and the German-Nordic Didaktik tradition. These two traditions have significantly influenced how education is understood and have a long social and cultural history that is closely connected to how education has been organised (see Westbury 2000; Uljens & Ylimaki 2017).

2 Two different traditions on how education should be organised

By briefly contrasting the two traditions, I aim to clarify the key differences between them regarding educational objectives, content, evaluation, and organisational structure. Although these traditions mainly developed within the formal education system, I would suggest that current developments in lifelong learning and older adult learning have similarities with core aspects of the Anglo-American curriculum tradition.

Westbury (2000) argues that the American curriculum tradition focuses on organisation and the school as a system. The curriculum becomes an essential part of the organisation, serving as a framework and functioning like a manual for teachers, with templates outlining what teaching should consist of in terms of content and method (Westbury 2000). This provides clear guidance and control over how teaching can be delivered and what routines can be established. The teacher's role is to implement what is outlined in the curriculum. This tradition has offered valuable lessons about the relationship between school and society. Within the Anglo-American curriculum tradition, the system holds the central role, and schools at the local level are expected to organise education in ways that align with the system's premises. Teachers are expected to use methods and pedagogies deemed necessary at the local level to meet the system's requirements. The Anglo-American curriculum tradition initially focused on the students' learning process (Knapp & Hopmann 2017). There is a particular emphasis on the question of how and on the methods teachers employ (Westbury 2000).

In the German-Nordic Didaktik tradition, on the other hand, the teacher's role is highlighted differently. It emphasises the space and freedom that teachers have to shape their teaching. The curriculum does not have as much of a guiding function, although there are still descriptions of key content that a teacher must follow. Bildung guides teachers' reflective practice, where teaching becomes something more than just implementing specific skills and knowledge in the learners (Westbury 2000). For Klafki (2000), the key aspect of Bildung is the development and maturation of physical, spiritual, and mental capacities rather than merely acquiring specific content. The teacher's professional autonomy becomes important here (Knapp & Hopmann 2017). The German-Nordic Didaktik tradition underlines the teacher's vital role in making various Didaktik choices so that the encounter between content and student is as meaningful as possible for the student. The three main Didaktik questions, *why* teach something, *what* content is essential, and *how* to teach it, guide teachers' reflective practice. The teacher is given a central role here, and particular attention is paid to the teacher's choice of content (Westbury 2000).

Within these two traditions, educational research has evolved in different forms (Biesta 2011). In the German-Continental construction of educational research, education has established itself as an independent academic field with its own theories. The focus has been on student emancipation. In the Anglo-American curriculum tradition, education as a field of research has become a multidisciplinary area. Various disciplines, such as psychology, history, and sociology, are interested in education as a re-

search subject (Biesta 2011). This influences which issues become important to prioritise in educational research. Biesta (2017) argues that the increased focus on learning can partly be explained by the influence of the Anglo-American tradition on practice, policy, and educational researchers. According to Biesta (2010), there has been a „learningification of education”, and an example of this is the renaming of adult education to lifelong learning. It has shaped perceptions of what matters in discussions about education. I do not wish to suggest that this tradition alone has led policymakers and organisations to concentrate more on learning. However, there are similarities.

I believe the Anglo-American curriculum tradition’s focus on the *how*-question aligns with current discourses on lifelong learning. With increased emphasis on learning, education’s primary role is ensuring students learn and teachers create effective learning environments (Biesta 2010). This tendency is also evident in research on teaching older adults, where the emphasis has been on methods (e.g., Schiller et al. 2020), and the teacher is described as an instructor (Ko 2020). This highlights a stronger focus on methods, expecting teachers to implement and teach as effectively as possible. Biesta also notes that the language of learning has limitations as an educational language. In education, questions about why we should learn and what content is essential are central, yet the language of learning overshadows them. Biesta (2010) argues that the point is not just that students learn, but that they learn something for a specific purpose. Therefore, there is a risk that too much attention is given to the question of *how*. Treating the learning process as open-ended without specifying goals and content may lead us to overlook important aspects of understanding education for older adults and what teachers consider important.

Simultaneously, there is a risk that the question of why people should learn is discussed in isolation. There are strong hopes that lifelong learning will help promote active ageing. Similar to the Anglo-American curriculum tradition, research on learning in older adults has established itself as a multidisciplinary field. One important theme in research on lifelong learning for older adults is the link between learning and health. Many disciplines are interested in this relationship, leading to different theories and perspectives on understanding learning. Educational theories and concepts are not in the foreground; instead, learning is examined through other approaches (Schoultz et al. 2020). The question of what content older adults should learn is not given much attention. The content taught to older adult participants is not understood as important in itself, but rather as a means of developing their health.

The German-Nordic tradition of Didaktik contrasts with the idea of lifelong learning. Didaktik theory offers concepts and theoretical explanations that help us view education and learning differently. In the next section, I will demonstrate how Didaktik theory can improve our understanding of education for older adults. I will start with the context of older adults’ education in Sweden.

3 Didaktik theory and its potential to understand older adults' education

To comprehend how Didaktik theory can be applied to understand older adults' education, we first need to consider the conditions influencing seniors' participation in education in Sweden. In Sweden, seniors constitute a significant portion of participants in Swedish Folkbildning activities. The learning occurring in these activities can be classified as non-formal learning, taking place outside the formal education system and not leading to formal qualifications. Bildung is a fundamental value, with a focus on the personal and cultural maturity of the individual, as well as the development of their sense of self as a human being (Bjursell 2019). Participation is voluntary, and in a Swedish context, there is no national curriculum to adhere to. This characteristic imparts a unique nature to these educational activities and influences the Didaktik decisions that a teacher makes within them.

Didaktik theory provides concepts and ideas that are useful for examining teachers' reflections on older adults' learning in Swedish Folkbildning activities. I want to highlight two aspects in particular. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Bildung has been a key part of the teaching practice involving older adults. To understand the teaching that takes shape in older adult education, theoretical explanations and concepts are needed that consider the focus on Bildung in older adult learning. Bildung is also central to Didaktik theory, where personal development and growth are essential aspects. The focus is on existential questions and the unique character of the individual, with interest directed towards the process of knowledge creation and how personality is shaped (Knapp & Hopmann 2017).

Secondly, the non-formal educational setting for older adults highlights the teachers' selection of educational content. Since there is no national curriculum with specific guidelines for what to teach, teachers' autonomous role is actualised. Formal education, on the other hand, is governed by a curriculum with guidelines for content selection, and the focus is on acquiring knowledge and skills to access various professions. In non-formal learning for older adults, the focus is not on these instrumental values; instead, older adults value learning for its own sake (Schoultz et al. 2022). These values must be recognised, and Didaktik provides theoretical insights that help us see beyond education as merely a means to predetermined ends. In the German-Nordic Didaktik tradition, the question of what is particularly important. Klafki (2000) emphasises that the question of content is central. What should be covered in teaching is rather an open question, asked in relation to Bildung and not based on fixed outcomes.

To illustrate how Didaktik theory can contribute to understanding teachers' Didaktik choices and how these shape teaching, I will present some results from a study I conducted with teachers who teach older adults in Swedish Folkbildning activities. The study is published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* and is titled *Teachers' reflections on their practices in older adult non-formal education* (Schoultz 2024). The study focused on the principles the teachers conveyed when making statements about the different choices they made regarding the Didaktik questions of why, what,

and how. Following Lidar and Lundqvist (2022), the teachers' statements and reflections can be understood as expressions of their teaching habits and the meaning they assign to their teaching. The empirical material was gathered through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with ten teachers. Contact was made with teachers from diverse learning environments to obtain varied empirical material.

Didaktik theory is used to promote a deeper understanding of teachers' statements and Didaktik principles for teaching. Teachers respond to three main questions: *why* teach something, *what* content is essential, and *how* to teach it, in different ways. The answers to these three main Didaktik questions form a unity that can be understood as a teaching approach (Westbury 2000). Two teaching approaches were identified: an intrinsic approach and an instrumental approach. Most of the teachers interviewed had an intrinsic approach to teaching. I want to elaborate on this approach to highlight teachers' critical reflections on their practices and how they form a teaching approach. With its focus on education, Didaktik offers a deeper understanding of the intrinsic teaching approach. Within this approach, the elements of *Bildung* are highlighted, which involve critical thinking and questioning certain notions about the world. I will discuss four principles within the intrinsic approach: *Critical inquiry*, *Plurality*, *Participants' interests*, and *Students' active participation*, more deeply.

The principles of *critical inquiry* are connected to teachers' reflections on the 'why' question. Through the principle of *critical inquiry*, teachers aim to clarify the importance of participants critically reflecting on and considering the ideas within society. Education is not viewed here as a means to an outside goal beyond the educational context. Teachers emphasise the Didaktik principles of *plurality* and *participants' interests* as significant for the 'what' question. The principle of *plurality* demonstrates how teachers seek to select diverse content so that learners encounter different perspectives. It also helps teachers to nuance and illustrate the breadth of a subject or field. With the principle of *participants' interests*, teachers highlight that learners' interests and prior experiences serve as a foundation when choosing course content. Teachers, therefore, reflect on how specific content can be meaningful to learners and how learners can find value in it. The Didaktik principles *Students active participation* is related to the how-question. Teachers emphasise the importance of participants being active, engaging in discussion, and participating actively in the learning process. Learning is not an individual activity.

The teachers' reflections on the three main Didaktik questions vary. However, the three Didaktik questions are interconnected, with a clear link between the principles of *critical inquiry*, *plurality*, *participants' interests*, and *students' active participation*. The teachers in the study often considered the 'why' and 'what' questions simultaneously when reflecting on their teaching. For them, it was essential that the course participants were exposed to content reflecting different perspectives on a theme or area that interested them. Encountering diverse viewpoints offers an opportunity to begin critically reflecting on the nature of society. It is in this context that they aimed for participants to develop their critical thinking. The question of content selection becomes especially significant. It was not just any critical thinking, but issues directly impacting

the participants, such as ageism and religion. Based on this, teachers then reflect on the how-question, highlighting that participants should be active and engage in discussion with each other. By doing so, they can encounter and share each other's thoughts.

Within education for older adults, the Didaktik 'what-question' becomes particularly important. Klafki (2000) argues that teachers need to reflect on the significance that content already has for the learner. The two principles of content selection illustrate that teaching involves more than just instructing and implementing factual knowledge to learners. The content should be treated in a way that creates meaning for the participants. In this case, the teacher must strike a balance between choosing content that aligns with learners' interests and experiences and providing learners with new perspectives and insights they have not considered before. Suppose a teacher focuses too much on the interests of the learners. In that case, there is a risk that the content they encounter is already so familiar that it does not provoke critical reflection or foster new insights and perspectives. Conversely, suppose too much focus is placed on selecting content that introduces new viewpoints. In that case, participants may find it difficult to engage with it and use their previous experiences to make the content meaningful. Teaching, therefore, becomes an art where the teacher must make careful considerations.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, how the concept of lifelong learning is discussed in policy and politics contrasts with the values highlighted by teachers who teach older adults. Teachers emphasise the intrinsic value of learning as the core aspect where learning matters for its own sake. They do not emphasise participation in education as a means to achieve specific goals, such as reducing illness and sickness. Instead, other values take precedence, like providing participants with the opportunity to pursue personal interests (Schoultz et al 2022). Therefore, attention cannot be solely on the external objectives that organisations like the EU deem important. The values emphasised by teachers and older participants must be recognised when planning education for older adults in the future. Didaktik theory contributes to research on older adults' learning. While previous research mainly described the teacher as an instructor (e.g., Ko 2020), Didaktik theory clarifies that teachers continually make choices during teaching. A fundamental purpose of teaching in the tradition of Didaktik is to create opportunities for meaningful encounters between students and specific content (Klafki 2000). The teacher's role is crucial in mediating the interaction between participants and content. Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore Didaktik practices within seniors' learning. Various educational activities should be investigated, considering the circumstances that influence these activities.

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Autor

Magnus Schoultz, Dr., Senior lecturer, GIH – the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, Department of Movement, Culture and Society.

Review

Dieser Beitrag wurde nach der qualitativen Prüfung durch das Peer-Review und die Redaktionskonferenz am 09.10.2025 zur Veröffentlichung angenommen.

This article was accepted for publication following a qualitative peer review at the editorial meeting on the 9th of October 2025.