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An academic critique of current thinking in relation to the concept of adult learning and the adult learner in the context of today's PCET

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Abstract

Who are adult learners? Adult learners are normally considered as the learners who are over the age of 25 years. They are referred as non-traditional students. Adult learner groups have different abilities and a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds. They have more responsibilities and experiences. In the traditional education system, as soon as students finish the high school, they enrol in tertiary education. It can be a diploma or an undergraduate program. The adult learner typically does not follow the traditional education system. Adult education is also called "workforce education" (Mary Jo Self, Ed.D.)

In this short essay I have chosen to present some aspects of my current learning and teaching experience, within the larger context of my personal, professional and academic experiences, I intend to exercise initiative and personal responsibility to assess my teaching practice experience and identify opportunities for personal and professional development following completion of the PCET programme in University of Wales Trinity Saint David . I will use my own background and experience to address some of the aspects in relation to the concept of adult learning and the adult learner in the context of PCET, Later in this essay I will focus on the barriers to adult learning, the evolution of the adult learner and our unique role in working with them .

Introduction

In adult education theory, andragogy refers to “education of adults” while pedagogy refers to “education of children” (2005). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) discuss six assumptions of andragogy. The first, The Learner’s Need to Know, describes the understanding of knowing how and why to create a valuable lesson, feedback from reflection that allows the learner to move towards new learning while realizing that learning is an ongoing process. The second is The Learner’s Self-Concept, which requires a change in behaviour (self-directed), developing a need for autonomy, structure for self-growth, and direct own learning. Early years learning created dependent learning which why a learner-centered focus of is critical with adult learners. The Role of the Learner’s Experience is rich with adult experiences. “Adults want to use what they know and want to be acknowledged for having that knowledge.” Self-identity, habits, and biases are defined from experiences. The fourth assumption is A Student’s Readiness to Learn, as Knowles explained, “they experience a need to learn it in order to cope more satisfyingly with real-life tasks or problems” (1980). The next assumption is The Student’s Orientation to Learning and it refers to what they are performing, solving, or learning that can be applied to their lives. The last assumption is the Student’s Motivation to Learn. This requires motivators such as “internal priorities” with incentives such as “increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, and quality of life.” Equiring adult learners to “take ownership of the learning process”

According to Knowles, andragogy includes six assumptions from a psychological perspective: Readiness to Learn, Role of the Learner’s Experience, Faculty Member as a Facilitator of Learning, Adult’s Orientation to Learning, Learner’s Self-Concept, and Learner’s Need to Know (Fidishun, nd). Knowles’ premise of adult learning theory is that adults are “self-directed, problem cantered, readily adapt learned useful information,” and create an environment in which to “assume responsibility for their learning” (Norton, 1998,).

Knowles (1978) stated that the “ultimate purpose of all education is to help individuals develop the attitude that learning is a life-long process” (Richardson, 2005).

Historical background

As a mature learner myself, as I turn fifty this year, I consider my experiences as a continuing evolving platform for my learning.

My interest in Egyptology and history has been a constant in my educational life. This interest covers Egyptian history, life, geography, religion. I regularly lecture to Egyptology and Archaeology Societies in schools and colleges.

This year I joined the Postgraduate Certificate in Education. I wanted to follow this PCET course to help me improve in my work, especially how I should tackle students, problems that may arise from time to time and to understand better student's needs and behaviour.

This will help me to be of better service to students as well as to enjoy my work more, going home relaxed with less tension due to problems at work. In retrospect, that was the most valuable and formative learning experience in my life and it is this latter educational approach that is influencing my current learning context the most.

I believe that adults learn in different ways. It is not good to attempt to use one single learning philosophy for all aspects of learning, even though a constructivist approach is likely to be a better fit for most learning situations.

My experience with teaching Ancient Egypt leads me to formulate some thoughts on whether this latter approach is always appropriate. I will do this in a narrative manner, thus avoiding academic discussions on this issue. What follows is an account from my personal perspective.

I subscribe to the belief that adult learns best when they are given the tools to express themselves along lines that will ensure clear and smooth communication. This is a step-by-

step process and not unlike the development of expertise. Of course, over the decades different teaching methodologies of PCET program have been established.

Conclusions

When choosing between traditional and less traditional learning approaches it is important to consider many aspects, including those listed in the suggestions for this assignment: the institution in which learning occurs; the conditions under which people learn; the physical resources available to them; the human network that can support students in their learning (tutors, mentors, learning communities, learning partners, teachers, etc.); what works and what doesn't work in a certain learning environment. This latter point is best approached through reflection, external evaluation, self-reflection, self-evaluation, and student assessment. I believe that productive learning will benefit from an ongoing evaluation of all the components and actors that are operating within a specific learning context. Courtney, S. (1989) "Adult Education is an intervention into the ordinary business of life—an intervention whose immediate goal is change, in knowledge or in competence. An adult educator is one, essentially, who is skilled at making such interventions."

Concept of adult learning and the adult learner in the context of today's PCET

Knowles (1984) asserts that adult learners possess certain characteristic features, which include; self-direction, readiness to learn, experience, motivation to learn and problem oriented. Knowles (1984) is taken to be the father or founder of andragogy, a discipline dedicated to the study of adult learning. Knowles (1984) defines an adult learner as one who is mature, has a wealth of experience, is sufficiently motivated and needs to appreciate the logic behind learning.

Learning is a life-long process. It starts from the very first day of life to the very last day of the life. Most people think that learning or studying happens only in school or college life.

This thinking may be more from the adults. According to Quad (1977), a special understanding of barriers and motivators to adult education is important.

There are three different ways by which an adult learner can be defined; cognitive maturity, age, and non-traditional learner. Of the three categorizations, age seems more pragmatic. International organizations such as OECD, UNESCO, and EC have defined adult learners as persons between the ages of 24 to 65. Additionally, classification, selection, and evaluation of adult learners are simplified if it is based on age categorization. The group of learners represented in the age bracket of 24 to 65 include employed, unemployed and retired learners (Houde, 2006). This categorization is important because it further distinguishes the motivation and barriers encountered by the different groups of adult learners.

Who can be defined as an adult learner? An adult learner is a person, generally past the age of 16, who has previously left the formal schooling system and who now has re-entered that system for further education/training. Such a person typically has responsibilities in several adult life roles.

According to this concept, individuals need to embrace a learning system that persists throughout life (Ozuah, 2005)

Adult learners will have many responsibilities unlike a fresh high school student. Most of the adults are full time workers and full-time parents. They have many barriers to learning. For instance, adult learners have their own view of the world around them, their personal view to success, and the requirements for their success (Quad, 1977)

The adult learning theory is a collaborative effort; it takes initiative, a positive attitude, and taking responsibility/accountability for your own learning. "To succeed, we must unlearn our teacher-reliance...take it upon us to meet our learning needs and demand training providers to do the same. To know our demands, we must know how to process

information” (Conner, 2005). Knowles says, “We must learn from everything we do; we must exploit every experience as a learning experience. Every institution and every person we have access to become a resource.

Barriers and Resistance

Illeris (2007) affirms that learning is affected or influenced by the three dimensions of learning. The barriers and resistance might be because of interplay between external factors and internal factors. Barriers to learning might take the form of informational, institutional, and demographic barriers. These barriers can be eliminated by the establishment of a strong sense of belonging to groups, institutions, and societies. Dispositional barriers are considered the most significant because they touch on self-actualization and esteem.

The motivation and barriers to adult learning are like two opposing forces. McClusky’s theory of margin postulates that for adult learning to occur, the motivation to participate must exceed the barriers not to participate. This theory can be exemplified in a case where the motivation is seen in the person’s cognitive abilities while the barrier is presented by the academic requirements (Falasca,, 2011). If the motivation is stronger than the barrier then this adult learner will have a positive margin meaning that he can partake of the learning process. This margin must be maintained for the learner to participate continually in the learning process.

These barriers can be divided into various categories. It can be physical barrier, attitudinal barrier or a structural barrier. It is true that adults always face some challenges that younger people do not have to face. Some studies show that many adult women face a lot of barriers like early pregnancy, low socio-economic status, child care and many more as a barrier to learning. Factors that motivate or bar students from participating in learning are several and can be broken into two major categories; socio-environment and the individual learner (Ahl,

2006) These barriers will be broadly discussed. A fundamental aspect to continuing higher education is identifying and overcoming barriers to adult learning.

The Motivation and Barriers to Learning

Thoms (2001) defines adult learners as a group of learners that rely on a set of habits, rational framework and strong taste to form their opinion on matters related to decision making. This distinguishes adult learners from children. Another complication to adult learning is introduced where the learner has to double up his learning with culturally expected roles such as those of parenting, work and spousal relations among other things. (Henschke, 2006).

The purpose and reason for learning varies from one learner to the next. These can include the need to fill an education gap, to be better suited for optimum performance, to achieve personal development, or to qualify for a better paying job. It is worth noting that some adult learners pursue education with an aim to improve themselves while others do it for fun (Houde, 2005). The individual engaging in the learning process must start by establishing the reason for and purpose of their commitment to the learning process and then derive their motivation from the listed reasons and purposes.

Adult learners at different phases of their lives will have different reasons and purposes for getting into the learning process. Enumerating all the reasons why adults get into learning might be a daunting task. Therefore, the creation of a typology of reasons for the engagement of the various groups of adult learners is the best approach to analyze the motivation and barriers to adult learning (Houde, 2006).

Conclusion and Recommendation

There are many factors/theories that influence adult learning. Malcolm Knowles "model for adult learning provides a framework for education that includes principles that value the individual's life experiences" (Hanson, 2004, p.269)¹. In summary, the learner must be sufficiently motivated to participate in the adult learning process. Adult learners from different stages of life are motivated to partake of the learning process by different factors. Learning will only take place when the motivations for participation exceed the barriers against participation

1. Always remember that adult learners are not just larger versions of children. Adult Learners have experienced things that can impact their ability to function whether temporarily or permanently. Factors that motivate or bar students from participating in learning are several and can be broken into two major categories; socio-environment and the individual learner (Ahl, 2006) Layoff or terminations of jobs, death of significant others and long-term illnesses are just of a few situations that can negatively impact the adult learner. Always keep these things in mind and treat your learners accordingly.
2. Working with Adult Learners can be more of a challenge than working with youth. Because the adult learner has more experience and more defined conceptions on various subjects, the teacher may have to incorporate more "real life" issues in
3. Adult Learners should never be treated like children. Adults function on a different level and therefore require a more cooperative, relaxed atmosphere. Threatening or intimidating adults can lead to negative, defensive responses. Courtesy and consideration are what will work well.

4. Let us compare the difference between those who teach adults and those who teach youth. Traditionally, those who teach youth are presumed to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for the curriculum and are responsible for conveying this information to the learner. The student is seen as a vessel or container – receiving, without question, what the teacher transmits.
5. With more people graduating with college degrees and advanced technical training skills, competing employees will be at a disadvantage if they possess no more than rudimentary reading, writing, and mathematical skills.
6. The adult instructor is assumed to be the one who is responsible only for providing guidance to the learners. These students choose what is important to learn and when and how they are going to learn it. These adult learners were formerly viewed as being completely self-directing.

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