

How adults learn: A Reflection

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Abstract

Theories on how adults learn, such as andragogy (Knowles, 1980), transformational (Mezirow, 2000) and self-directed learning (Tough, 1971, and Cross, 1981) provide insight into how adult students learn and how instructors like me can be more responsive to the needs of my learners by use of effective teaching practices. Whilst these theories suggest that adults use experience as a means of learning, are self-directed, motivated and oriented towards learning, in my view, they are generic and are less culture- and context-specific.

Introduction

Based on Brookfield's (1995) relative areas of own reflection, student feedback, peer assessment and theoretical literature, I have reflected upon how adults learn in what was, for me, a new cultural context outside the UK. This paper will provide a brief overview of how adults learn and will end with my reflections and action points to improve my practice. In addition to my experience in a new cultural context outside the UK, it was the first time that I had taught working adults who were returning to study after some years away from formal education. From speaking to the students, I realised that these adults were returning to education with such varied goals as career transition, skills' enhancement and improved employability chances in a competitive job market. Students on my course learned in primarily two ways: first, through group discussions; second, by relating what had been taught on the course to their real life experience. Let me elaborate these further.

Like young learners, adult students in group discussions were able to interact fully, voicing their views on the topic and listening to others'. In line with Mezirow's (2000) remarks about transformational learning, I noticed that, as students discussed, reflected, challenged different research ideas and considered various perspectives, they often experienced a shift in their views about the topic and about the research process itself. For example, although the students had the freedom and ability to choose research topics of their own, they initially thought it could be a daunting process. Yet some of them reported to me that the group discussions helped them to understand how to choose, define and limit the scope of the research topic. It soon became evident that, in spite both of self-consciousness about their language ability and of early challenges to balanced discussion by a few dominant personalities, they gradually, session by session, increased the depth of their learning, knowledge and skills to unprecedented personal levels. Though they had started the course with no prior experience or awareness of the research process, it took only one or two group discussions before they were thinking carefully about and beginning to investigate and write on their chosen research topic. Their rapid progress in identifying potential problems, developing research questions and narrowing the scope of their study soon led them to a much better sense of how to choose a realistic topic for themselves.

In terms of relating the course to their experience, I noticed, in accordance with Knowles (1984), that most of my students were motivated to improve their job skills, gain a particular type of knowledge and achieve professional growth; they tended to link what had been

taught in class with what they knew from life in order to validate particular concepts. For instance, the work experience of a few students enabled them to foresee at least one challenge presented by the data collection environment and to suggest how it might be addressed. However, whilst the practice was facilitating their learning, I felt that, for a course like research methods, and with students with no previous experience of research, experiential learning had its limitations when it came to the understanding of such critical aspects of a proposal as literature review and data analysis. Moreover, experience, which is more central to transformational learning, is difficult to measure.

With reference to MacKeracher's (2012) types of experience, one of the things that surprised me was that the students were relying on culturally- and socially-imposed experience or preconceived notions, rather than what they had experienced directly. For instance, they had preconceptions about whether they would or would not be able to work a specific research topic. Since, either consciously or unconsciously, these notions might well have had a tangible effect on their work, it was important that I help the students overcome them and embrace new ideas. To this end, I provided a substantial amount of information on research philosophies and strategies and also used a couple of demonstrations.

In keeping with the views of Davies and Williams (2001), and Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002), the adult students in my class for the most part wanted to improve their qualifications, were interested in advancing their career and sought a change in the direction of their life. With the exception of two students, I noted that most of my class learned by sharing their views and opinions on a topic with others in their group, and to some extent matching taught material to personal experience.

Whilst what happened in practice bore out most of the theories on how adults learn, I did see a few exceptions to this. I realised that self-directedness, identified by Tough (1971), Cross (1981) and Mezirow (1985) as a central competence of adult learning, is indeed influenced by adults' life situation (Knox, 1986), social status and cultural influences. Knowles (1975) views self-directed learning as a process whereby, without the help of others, individual learners diagnose their learning needs, formulate goals, identify required resources and evaluate their learning outcomes. My discussions with the students, reflecting what Tennant (1988) suggests, indicated that not all students were self-directed and that the readiness to learn of some of them was largely governed by what society expected them to learn; this might account for their apparent lack of motivation in class activities and of inward determination to raise their levels of competence. Though I had to spend a great deal of time talking to these students, the opportunity to probe reasons for such exceptions has led me to deduce that the way adults learn is more complex than the theories suggest.

Having reflected on all this, I have learnt that, in contrast to young learners, adults have unique challenges, motivations and expectations. Whilst adults take responsibility for their learning and have better time management skills, the way they learn is subject to the culture and the context of where they live. Furthermore, my experience in teaching adult students informs me that, in addition to social and cultural context, their employment status and aspirations make a difference to the way they learn. In order to boost their confidence and facilitate their learning, in addition to gaining more culture-specific knowledge, I sought to discover what my students' expectations were and provided information that they could relate to their work. I strove to create a friendly learning environment so that students' personal obligations wouldn't obstruct their learning and drive for competence.

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