

ARE ADULT LEARNERS *DIFFERENT*?

By Dr David C.L. Lim

Are adult learners *different*? And do we need to approach them differently from pre-adults? Of course, on the immediate level, we know that adult learners are different from younger learners who enter university for full-time studies right after high school.

Adult learners are older, which means that they would have accumulated a wealth of life and work experience. The vast majority of OUM learners fall into this category. They work full-time and study part-time, on top of juggling personal and family responsibilities.

Aside from profile, another often highlighted difference between these two groups of learners has to do with the cognitive processes of learning.



Learning theories have it that adults, by virtue of their age, experience and maturity, have the advantage of being independent in learning. The common assumption is that adult learners are self-directed, while pre-adult learners require top-down direction from the teacher.

Adults are presumed to be self-aware, self-motivated and self-empowered to make rational choices for and by themselves when it comes to learning. The understanding is that they need not be forced to learn in the way that children will only learn when threatened by a cane-wielding teacher.

Learning is thus seen as something adults volitionally choose to do to achieve certain goals and rewards (career advancement, self-satisfaction, etc.). They know what they want. Therefore, what they need is a supportive guide, not a pedagogue.

Some practitioners believe that, because of these marked differences between adults and pre-adults, pedagogy (literally, “the art and science of teaching children”) should be abandoned when it comes to adult

teaching and replaced by androgogy (“the art and science of teaching adults”).

Attractive as it is, the proposition is problematic because it rests on the faulty assumption that adult learners are homogeneous, all unwaveringly self-directed and autonomous. This, as those of us who have taught adult learners know, flies in the face of reality on the ground.

The real issue for me, in other words, is not that we ought to treat adult learners differently from pre-adults but that we ought to treat both in the same way...

There is yet another problem with the proposition that adults ought to be “taught” differently from younger learners. The problem is it implicitly assumes that only adults deserve to be favoured with the learner-centred approach to learning, while pre-adults learn best as passive recipients of subject content transmitted by the all-knowing teacher-authority.

In all, it seems unproductive to me to preoccupy ourselves with the constructed dichotomy between pedagogy and androgogy when the

real issue should be how we ought to approach the learner, young or old.

Do we believe all learners have prior experiences which are worthy of respect and are valuable as the starting point of learning?

Or do we believe only adult learners deserve to be exempted from what are commonly prescribed to “children” and adults who are

“slow” to learn; namely authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae and punitive disciplinary measures?

The real issue for me, in other words, is not that we ought to treat adult learners differently from pre-adults but that we ought to treat both in the same way – as thinking-feeling individuals for whom education should not be reduced to rote learning or any kind of learning that does not allow them to meaningfully

integrate what they learn into their self-conception.

This, then, brings us back to the original question of whether adult learners are different. My qualified answer is an emphatic yes: each learner – including the adult – is different from his or her peers in complex ways.

For me, in the end, if differences between adult learners are ultimately irreducible, then so much the better. After all, if everyone were the same, what would be left to learn?

In infinite permutations, each differs in combinations of cultural background, cognitive ability, personality traits, learning preferences, prior knowledge, expectations, gender, class, etc.

Hence, against reductionist textbook prescriptions of androgogy, we find in our living classrooms the counter-reality that not all adult learners are equally self-directed or capable of taking control of the mechanics and techniques of teaching themselves, as they are required to in open and distance learning.

Similarly, not all of them are equally autonomous or able to

assume control and ownership of their learning. In any case, it is worth pointing out that even if an adult learner were self-directed or autonomous, it does not necessarily mean that he or she will reject a highly teacher-directed instructional setting, and vice versa.

What, then, is the lesson to be derived from the irreducibility of learner difference, both in the general and OUM contexts?

Having tutored and conducted seminars at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels at OUM for the past six years or so, I have found that it pays to respect individual learner differences.

Respect their determination to learn despite the many obstacles before them. Respect the responsibility they shoulder for self-directing their studies. And respect the success they set out to attain when they enrol for a course.

Part of this articulation of respect comes in the form of the attitude we bring to class as tutors or instructors. Being amply prepared for class and having a good sense of humour can go a long way in creating a conducive (read: non-dreary) teaching-learning environment.

So will the ability to contextualise principles, issues and examples in vivid ways that learners can connect with. Be respectfully irreverent if it helps them to approach their studies with a critical eye and to break the habit of swallowing everything they learn without questioning. Encourage them to draw from and relate issues to their own experiences.

Learners often know more than they realise, as I discovered in a Counselling class I once conducted, in which some of the learners were head nurses who had counselled countless distraught patients (including terminally ill ones) in their professional lives without fully realising they were in fact already experts in counselling!

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