A CASE STUDY: THE INFLUENCE OF ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES ON THE LEARNING PROCESS OF OUM LEARNERS

Nor Asiah Mahmood  
Faculty of Business and Management  
Open University Malaysia, Malaysia  
asiah_mahmood@oum.edu.my  

Shazreen Mohd Shah  
Sekolah Seri Puteri, Cyberjaya, Malaysia  
shazreen@seriputeri.edu.my  

ABSTRACT  
The principles of adult learning are crucial aspects to be examined since they play significant roles in the learning process involving adults. This study aims to identify the principles that are most applied by or the most helpful to OUM learners in order to obtain good academic results. Applying such principles at the individual level significantly contributes to the success of OUM learners in their studies as indicated by researchers who found that adapting the principles of adult learning in the learning process can in turn provide significant benefits for the students (Sweeny, 2008). It is also considered as best practices for the learners (Goodlad, 2005), with a strong correlation found between principles of adult learning and academic success in the learning process of university students (Roger, 2002). The data collected for this study will be limited to the Klang Valley for geographical reasons with the results identifying the principles of adult learning that help our learners to be academically focused and successful.

Field of Research:  Principles of Adult Learning (PAL), Learning Process (LP), Success

1. Introduction

The learning processes of OUM students can be influenced by the principles of adult learning (PAL) introduced by Malcolm Shepherd Knowles (1950). How far these principles actually influence the learning process of OUM students is the focus of this paper. Before discussing PAL further, it is worthwhile to look at the definition of ‘Andragogy’ which describes the science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1950). In other words, how adults learn in their informal or formal education as a life-long learning and which of the PAL is the most influential, or motivate them to achieve their aims. The issues here include which PAL actually impacts our students as ‘adult learners’ most. Additionally, other questions include whether they have to be ready, do they prefer to be respected and can they be voluntarily engaged in exchanging ideas with the other students in order to succeed in their studies. These are the issues that are to be examined in this study. Prior researches have pointed out that adapting the principles of adult learning (PAL) in the learning process can in turn achieve significant results for the students (Sweeny, 2008) and that they form best practices for the learners (Goodlad, 2005).
The main purpose of this paper is to identify which principles of adult learning are the most influential in the learning process of OUM students. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Determine the factors that influence the current OUM students in their learning process as adult learners.
2. Propose the input output system model to explain the significance of PAL to the OUM learners’ success.

2. Principles of adult learning (PAL)

Principles of adult learning (PAL) were introduced by Malcolm Shepherd Knowles (1950), the central figure in US adult education in the second half of the twentieth century. Knowles (1950) outlined six principles of adult learning which are adults are internally motivated and self-directed, adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences, adults are goal oriented, adults are relevancy oriented, adults are practical, and adults learners like to be respected. Yet, which of these six principles give the most impact to adult learners is unclear. What are the needs of adult learners, the reasons for pursuing their studies, and how they are going to study are some of the issues that that need to be addressed.

Adult learners often have to push a start button before they actually enrol for a program. Also, they need some kind of recognition from others in order to continue pursuing knowledge. In other words, adult learners need to take control of their own goals, find own way to solve problems, locate appropriate resources, make decisions on methods they are going use and at the end of the day, evaluate their own progress. Adult learners need to take these measures to ensure they achieve their targets.

3. Adult education, self-direction and andragogy

When discussing adult education, it can include informal or formal education or a combination of both. Informal education it can take place anywhere, at any time for different kinds of groups (Brew, 1946). It can involve housewives, retirees and also youths. This happens as they realise that they need to enhance their knowledge and perhaps change their styles or upgrade themselves (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). This is very much related to self-directed learning as such learners have to be autonomous or self-directed in their learning process, and be a leader in a group for learning to occur.

Work on self-direction is now so widespread that is justifies an annual international symposium devoted solely to research and theory in the area. Fundamentally, self-directed learning emphasises the need for learners to be independent and focused on what they hope to achieve. In the workplace, where informal learning can also take place, employees have to consider themselves as active learners at work in order to achieve organisational goals.

Even though there is much argument on how adults practice self-directed learning, there is still no strong evidence on how adults engage in self-directed learning using social networks and peer support groups for emotional sustenance and educational guidance (Knowles, 1984). In relation to this, the principles of Andragogy explain how adults learn, which is not characterised by spoon feeding but through two way communication and interactions to ensure that they engage with the learning process (Knowles, 1970, 1980). This is an important feature of
andragogy as adults are seen to bring more life experiences and knowledge to their learning process than young learners (Davenport, 1993).

4. The Learning Process

Tuijnman (1992) suggested that adult educators should capitalise on the ability of adults to learn how to learn and to become skilled at learning in a range of different situations and through a range of different styles. However, OUM learners differ, in that they tend to be proactive when they are engaged in the experiential learning process. They try to relate their own experiences with the theories they learn. This sharing of knowledge and experiences brings added value to the other adults in the class. Being proactive, and respecting each other also serve important roles in the learning process and create conducive learning environments.

Besides, as insightful adults, they tend to be more logical in their questions and answers in the discussion. The learning process becomes even more interesting if the topic discussed is related to their current jobs or they have similar experiences. When this happens, ‘coaching’ is conducted to guide them to go deeper into the topic and consequently, understand the whole situation better. This is supported by Kitchener and King (1990) who proposed the concepts of epistemic cognition and reflective judgment.

According to the principles of adult learners, adults are internally motivated and self-directed, adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences, adults are goal oriented, adults are relevancy oriented, adults are practical, and adult learners like to be respected. In this context, the learning process illustrates the following:

Adults learn by doing activities, not just by listening. They will remember best what they have learned last in the class. They will frequently use examples from the workplace or relevant profession of the trainees, in trying to relate to the learning process. Adults also learn best when they feel included or engaged with the class and the lecturer. Thus adult educators need to carefully plan the activities for their session. The lecturers play important roles by frequently asking questions and encouraging discussion, to encourage student centred learning. Adult learners often contribute many points for further discussion. Lecturers should make the class more productive, say the same thing in different ways, so the learners will not become bored as the capacity of adults to focus only stretches up to two hours.

Additionally, adults like to hear feedback, because they are always looking for ways to improve themselves especially in work and education. During the learning process, educators need to start the session with the most important points, because adult learners tend to remember the most important points more. Methods used must be appropriate, so that they will be engaged in the learning process and also because adults want to have fun while learning. Thus, they must be active in learning, enjoy the learning, and most importantly, practice two-way communication.

5. Impact on student success

Adults who are actually motivated and self-directed and goal oriented display the following characteristics; adults are internally motivated and self-directed, adults bring life experiences
and knowledge to learning experiences, adults are goal oriented, adults are relevancy oriented, adults are practical, and adult learners like to be respected.

6. Theoretical Framework

The input output system model is normally applied in quantitative research, which is more economic based. However, this research attempts to examine how the principles of adult learning influence the learning process and success of OUM students. In particular, it attempts to identify which of the principles is the most influential in the learning process in order for OUM learners to be successful. Based on the objective of this study, the above theoretical framework was developed (Figure1). The instrument used was adopted from Knowles (1950) work on adult learning principles in e-learning, with various adaptations in view of the different group of respondents involved, being the OUM students.

7. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, students from different backgrounds were randomly selected during their classes with the intention to create a sample which was representative of the following categories: gender (male, female); age (22-30 years, 31-40 years, 41-60); educational level (secondary, diploma holders) and employment status (working full-time, working part-time, retirees). In total, 20 adult students from various backgrounds and programs were selected and were individually interviewed. The respondents for this study comprised students from Open University Malaysia (OUM). Generally, they are all adults and working full-time. Based on the data collected, 97% OUM students are working adults with the oldest being a 77 year-old, in the sixth semester of his studies.

Some of the limitations of this study include that as adults, it was difficult to ask the learners to spend time on something that was deemed really beneficial to them, and some refused to answer the questionnaires. Thus, in-depth interview sessions involving a few respondents at one time were conducted. The sessions were conducted several times to accommodate different kinds of respondents. These in-depth interviews were carried out smoothly with the learners were very responsive to the questions posed.
In-depth interviews are a useful qualitative data collection technique that can be used for a variety of purposes, including needs assessment, program refinement, issue identification, and strategic planning. In-depth interviews are most appropriate for situations in which the researcher needs to ask open-ended questions that elicit depth of information from relatively few people (as opposed to surveys, which tend to be more quantitative and are conducted with larger numbers of people). This paper provides a brief introduction to in-depth interviewing as a tool for collecting rich information on which principles of adult learning most influence the OUM adult learners in their learning process. Adult learners in OUM form the unit of analysis as the University centres on working adults.

Being a good listener and paying full attention is one of the strategies to focus on what is being said. Active listening requires the listener to give full attention to the respondent until either the message has been received or the respondent has finished speaking. Following this, the listener should paraphrase what the respondent is saying to confirm to the respondent that the listener is actually listening and that the message conveyed is the message received. Paraphrasing also has the added benefit of forcing a respondent to focus wholly on the conversation, thus limiting distractions. Reflecting back to the respondent, the interviewer should also be able to recognize the emotions inherent in the message. By paying attention to tone and emotional content, the interviewer can gain a greater understanding of the messages being delivered.

Although active listening sounds easy, it takes a lot of practice. Thus, prior to conducting an in-depth interview, it is important to practice active listening on a friend or colleague. This can be done by instructing a friend to talk about a topic of interest and employing your active listening strategies during the conversation. Afterwards, ask for feedback and continue with different topics until active listening becomes a natural way of interacting.

8. Instrumentation

Interviews have been used extensively for data collection across all the disciplines of the social sciences & in educational research (Berry, 1999). Kvale (1996) observed the seven stages of conducting in-depth interviews which include thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and reporting.

Stage 1: Thematizing. In this stage, the interviewer has to clarify the purpose of the interviews. Moreover, the group of adult learners will often question why they have to be interviewed and the implications of the exercise. The interview conducted was more for data gathering, since the respondents had earlier refused to answer questions using survey methods, at the first attempt. Thus, there was a change in the method to gather in-depth information related to area of study. Firstly, the principles of adults learning and their relevance to them as adult learners in OUM were explained. Essentially, the researcher had to make sure that what the learners practiced everyday such as self-directed learning is considered one of the principles of adult learning. In this context, no one forces adult students to further their studies but because they are adults, they know what they want and how to achieve it. This illustrates the principles of adult learning in the adult education environment. Once the general purpose of the interview was decided, it was easier to identify the key information that needed to be gathered through the in-depth interview process.
**Stage 2: Designing.** After determining what needed to be known, we designed a way to elicit this information through the interview process. The interview included the key topics and questions as a formalized plan for collecting information. The focus is on the topics that are important to explore as well as the design of the interviews, so that consistency is maintained across interviews with different respondents.

The three essentials of interviews were used in gathering the information for this particular study. These include firstly, the *facesheet* which is used to record the time, date, and place of the interview, special conditions or circumstances that may affect the interview, and demographic information about the respondent being interviewed. Secondly, there are the *interview questions* which are placed on the left side of the page, along with a blank space on the right side of the page for written observations. Lastly, the *post-interview comment sheet*, which is a place to write notes after the interview; these notes should include feelings, interpretations, and other comments that arose during the interview (Kvale, 1996).

**Stage 3: Interviewing.** The interview session starts with some important introductions, about what the study is about, with explanations on the purpose of the study. The respondents are also put at ease. The procedure involves listening to and observing the respondents and guiding them through a conversation so that all the important issues during the interview are explored.

**Stage 4: Transcribing.** Transcribing involves creating a verbatim text of each interview by writing out each question and response. The interviewer’s side notes should also be included in the transcription, and properly labelled in a separate column or category. 

**Stage 5: Analysing.** Analysing involves re-reading the interview transcripts to identify themes emerging from the respondents’ answers. The topics and questions were used to organize the analysis, in essence, synthesizing the answers to the questions proposed. If the interviews raised more questions than they answered, more interviews may be necessary to accurately examine the issue at hand.

**Stage 6: Verifying.** Verifying involves checking the credibility of the information gathered and a method called triangulation is commonly used to achieve this purpose. Triangulation involves using multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of information. For example, a study that uses triangulation to examine the principles of adult learning that is the most influential in the learning process of OUM students would require researchers to interview at least three groups of respondents, i.e. students from the Bachelor of Accounting, Bachelor of Human Resource Management and Bachelor of Business Admin courses. When the participants say the same thing in the interviews, then the information is considered valid.

A simpler way to use triangulation in a study would be to have two colleagues read and analyse the same set of transcripts, and then compare notes. If the notes agree, then the information is credible (Kvale, 1996).

**Stage 7: Reporting.** Finally, results from the in-depth interviews were shared with internal and external stakeholders through a written or oral report; these reports describe not only the results, but how the results will shape future work. When respondents see that the information is being used, they are more likely to participate in future data collection efforts.
9. **Findings and Discussion**

The data was analysed using grounded theory such as coding which was done by reading over transcripts multiple times whilst comparing the responses and themes uncovered. The respondents for this study comprise students from Open University Malaysia (OUM), and are generally adults who are full time working. Based on the data, 97% are working adults, with the oldest being a 77-year old, in semester six of his studies.

Fundamentally, OUM students need to study on their own using online distance learning (ODL) or the materials given by the university. Generally, 88% of the learning is conducted on their own and face-to-face meetings with the lecturer only account for 8%. The findings of this study suggest that as adult learners, OUM students preferred to be autonomous or self-directed in their study as previously observed by Brockett and Hiemstra (1999). They know what they want, they know what they want to achieve in the specific time they allocated (Candy, 1991). This is the starting point at which they begin with their learning process. The findings support the study conducted by Knowles (1975), in that self-directed learning means that individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

According to Knowles (1975), self-direction is the continuous exercise of authentic control by the learner over all decisions about learning and reflects the ability to gain access to, and choose from, a full range of available and appropriate resources.

The most important factor was that adults liked to use life experiences and their knowledge in their learning process and to be successful in their studies. Being goal oriented was the second most important principle related to the learning process and this was followed by earning respect (Meriam and Caffarella, 1991). According to a student on the Bachelor Human Resource Management (BHRM) course, they mostly used or shared their experiences in group discussions so that they will better understand the topics discussed (Kett, 1994).

10. **Conclusion and Future Recommendations**

The main elements of the principles of adult learning (PAL) have been endorsed by the group of OUM respondents in this study, thus illustrating support for the accumulated knowledge on adult learning.

The main contribution of this paper is to demonstrate that the most important element of PAL was the sharing and application of life experiences to the learning process. This is central to the way adult students learn and to ensure academic success and indicates that the adult learner is motivated to a certain extent, by this need to share and apply life experiences in their learning. It also suggests that prior experience and knowledge is thus an asset in adult learning and is a factor to be exploited by adult educators and researchers. Moreover, it is significant that the adult learners were goal oriented and emphasised the value of respect. In other words, to be successful adult learners, it takes not only experience and a passion for sharing and learning, but also self-direction, as well as attitudes of trust and respect.
The findings of this study enrich understanding of and add to the literature on how adults learn, underlining the role and importance of PAL. However, despite their prominence, Malaysian universities specialising in adult education have yet to utilise these principles in creating the conditions that will nurture the positive traits of adult learners. This missing link holds implications for other researchers and also adult educators, in that future studies can be conducted to clarify the strategies to be employed in adult education, especially how PAL can be incorporated. Such studies may help adult education providers and educators in strategising, positioning and marketing adult education.

References


