



**"Seated Woman"**

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# Understanding and Reaching Adult Learners

## Abstract

*Advisors, faculty, administrators who work with adult learners need to understand them. This understanding incorporates learning capacity, learning styles, readiness to learn, and participation in learning. Advisors, faculty, and administrators use this knowledge base to 1) increase their advising repertoire, 2) change the climate in their classrooms, and 3) make adult students feel they matter.*

The adult learner, who enrolls in a university program, may encounter some situations that are frustrating and confusing. My awareness of these problems was heightened when I invited a friend to lunch during the preparation of this paper.

My friend, who has a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and is now enrolled in a Master's degree in Social Work, made it clear that, as a former professor at another university, she felt robbed of dignity and degraded. Seeking to understand her better, I asked her what it feels like to be an adult learner? Also, were her advisors helpful? These two simple questions evoked an enormous outpouring. "Nancy, it's like being a bag lady. I carry two bags in the winter – one for books and one for boots. I shuffle around hoping a professor will invite me in to sit for a minute. I have no place to get messages. As to my advisor, she is a wimp. I went to her about substituting a course. She sent me to the Dean who would not see me. Back to the advisor I went. Unable to make the change herself, she did not intervene with the Dean."

Consider another example – John, a 28-year-old man who had graduated from high school 10 years before and now sought higher education. This young man, handicapped by a severe learning disability, had compensated for it. After all those years, he finally got up his courage and went to a nearby community college to register. John reports that his advisors were unsympathetic, lazy, and disinterested. As a result of their lack of assistance, he in fact, had to take off from work three different times in order to return and complete the registration process. His advice: energize advisors and tell them about commitment.

The landscape is not, however, universally bleak. Here is a success story. I interviewed Shirley – a 48-year-old woman about to complete her B.S. in business management. She has a 4.0 average. She credits her success to her own competence and organizational skills – and equally to supportive, energetic, and informed advisors. They were available, they knew the rules, they cared, and they delivered.

Clearly, as these vignettes illustrate, advisors are terribly important to students of any age and they can be "for better or worse." Most of us would like it to be "for better." I suggest that we can engage in some specific activities which can insure that we are in the category "for better." If we will, as a first step, really **understand** the adult learner, this understanding will suggest a number of ways to better reach this population.

### **Understanding Adult Learners**

It is difficult to realize that by 2050 life expectancy will be 100 (Siegel & Taeuber, 1986, p. 98). This revolution in mortality will, of necessity, force us to rethink the meanings of age. Hagestad (1986) suggests that the common pattern of pressuring children to begin preschool earlier, rushing young people through high school, college, and then graduate school, does not make sense. Society might better help people think about ways to prepare more slowly and over longer periods of time for 80 years and more. She suggests that we need a life span slogan such as **Think 80**.

The implications for educators are enormous. The demographic revolution will force us to recast our assignment of education, work, and leisure "sequentially to the life stages of youth, adulthood, and old age." Changing "the relation between education and the stages of life" will be "a transformation as far-reaching as the 'discovery of childhood' described by Ariès" (Moody, 1986, pp. 191-2).

This change to lifelong learning, recurring education, or blended life plans requires a close look at the adult learner. Is the adult learner the

individual who has been out of school for several years and has decided to return? Is the adult student a person who decides to change gears and direction, entering professional training in midlife to late life? Is the adult learner a 50-year-old or a 30-year-old? Is the adult learner experienced or inexperienced? In other words, is there a definable entity known as the adult learner? Is there a distinct way in which adults learn?

In answering the question, Is there such an entity as the "adult learner"?, a case can be made for either position. Case 1: Yes, there is such an entity as evidenced by the growing number of articles and books on the subject demonstrating the special needs and capacities that distinguish them from traditional aged students. Case 2: No, there is no such entity as the "adult learner"; rather, adult learners are heterogeneous just as young learners are. Some would say that categorization itself causes difficulties. To say that the adult learner is a distinct category might be thought to feed into the "agism" of the current society. By making age the central variable, one might overlook other important characteristics of the adult learner or, worse, conclude that people at certain ages are simply too old to learn. On the other hand, denying the existence of adult learners as a distinct category may well lead to oversight of special needs of that population, needs which should be addressed by educator and policy makers. Of course, one could conclude that there is a distinct category known as adult learners, but within that category, there are wide and often dramatic differences.

This discussion is based on different assumptions about age. On the one hand there are those who see chronological age itself as the defining variable. For example, according to Levinson (1978), the issues of the 20-year-old are quite distinct from those of the 40-year-old. Levinson links adult behaviour to age and describes six distinct periods emphasizing sequentiality and similarity in the adult experience. This view has been widely noted in both the popular and scholarly press. Opposing these stage theorists are those scholars like Neugarten (1982), who analyze the complexities, varieties and heterogeneities of adulthood; who look at continuity and change across the course of life, but who are more concerned with the lack of predictability, with the surprises, with the unexpected things that can happen at any age to anyone. Neugarten concludes that people grow old differently. In fact, the scope of these differences becomes greater, not narrower.

Hagestad (1985) demonstrates the impossibility of assuming that adult lives follow an orderly, linear process. Actually, the process is circular. Careers are interrupted and started and individuals make loops in the age system. Examples of such loops would be a woman who becomes a college freshman at the age of 45 or a man who starts a new family at the age of 50. People engage in renewal activities all through adulthood; for example, in a given class one might find three grandmothers ranging in age

from 50 to 80. What we are seeing is a demographic change where four- and five-generation families may be the norm: where one can be both a grandmother and a granddaughter simultaneously.

Many educators talk and think about the adult learner as if there were such a recognizable, single entity for whom there is a set way of teaching, a set way of learning. It is tempting but wrong to assume that appearances and age can provide an understanding of what people think or feel, or how they behave. There is, we submit, a fluid life course. We are experiencing what Cross (1981) calls the "blended life pattern" in which one does not necessarily follow a prescribed life course – meaning one no longer goes to school, works, marries, and has children in that order. Some people at an unconventional age, are, for instance, marrying for the first time. Indeed, the facts about adult students that may really count are almost certain to be quite different from any current widely-held assumptions. Adults are a most diverse group, and, of course, people of all ages are heterogeneous and diverse; but generally as people get older, their idiosyncratic experiences and different commitments produce much more variability, not less.

### **Assumptions About Adult Learning**

If our conclusion is correct – that adults are heterogeneous and variable, and that they become more so as they age – then, obviously, that truth has implications for how they learn. To understand the variability of adults as learners we will examine some data on their capacity to learn, learning styles, readiness to learn, and participation in education.

#### ***Variability – learning capacity***

Although few would, I hope, subscribe to the notion that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks", the conventional wisdom does seem to be that intellectual functioning slows down with age. The newer data show that you can indeed teach old dogs new tricks, that learning, memory, competency do not necessarily slow down. In fact, given the proper environmental stimulation and good health, capacity can increase. Kohn (1980) and his associates demonstrated that learning capacity may increase for those men and women working in jobs assessed as substantively complex. Park's studies of memory contradict the usual findings that memory decreases with age. First, she shows the ineffectiveness of laboratory tests for understanding what occurs in "real" life. She concludes: "Although older adults may not remember as effectively as young adults both in and out of the laboratory, the encoding process and use of contextual information does not appear to be the locus of any qualitative deficits" (Park, 1986). With these new data, what do you say to a 55-year-old woman who wants to apply to a doctoral program in counselling psychology?

*Variability – learning style*

Even if we agree that capacity can be maintained and even increased, can we as advisers, counsellors, and teachers treat every adult in the same manner? Obviously not. Kolb (1981) contends that people learn differently. Some learn through concrete experience; others learn by reflecting; still others by abstract conceptualization; and some others by active experimentation. Although I have always had an aversion to the roughness of football, when my son began playing, I began understanding Kolb's work. The coaches teach by using all four modes of learning. The players had the concrete experience of being hit on the head and playing even with concussions; they reflected by watching videotapes of the game and discussing what they did that was effective and ineffective; they engaged in abstract conceptualization by studying a variety of plans and conceptualizing a "game plan" – how to engage in a winning game; they actively experimented by returning to the field and practising what they learned. Kolb's message was reinforced when I won a 20-year-old fight with my husband and convinced him to take dancing lessons. The teacher had us watch a videotape, showed us steps, made us promise to practise, and then insisted that we discuss the concept. Steve went to the lessons, with heavy heart and foot. He paid attention during the lesson but he refused to practise at home. He kept saying, "I learn by conceptualizing and visualizing; I have it in my head." One night we went dancing with friends, but when we entered the dance floor, Steve stood paralyzed. He could not translate what was in his head to his feet. He realized the importance of practising.

*Variability – readiness to learn*

According to one study, adults return to school primarily for career or family transition. Most women returned because of family transition followed by career transitions; but, for the most part, men's reasons were reversed (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). I suggest that readiness for the learning transition can be understood by applying the Transition Model – a structured system for assessing an individual's readiness for any transition (Schlossberg, 1984).

Readiness depends upon measuring strengths and weaknesses in three key areas. The first is the **transition or situation itself**. Does the individual see the learning situation as positive, negative, dreaded? Does it come at a good or bad time? Is the individual undergoing other stresses? For example, a young woman with two children to support realizes that in order to move out of this restrictive lifestyle, she needs further education with a career focus. She is ready to learn because of career reasons but not ready in terms of caring for small children. One young man is very ready to learn. He sees the learning transition as positive and it is at a particularly good time in his life. We see that each potential learner is in a different place regarding the learning transition.

The second area predicting readiness relates to one's **inner strengths** – that is, one's ability to cope and to use many coping strategies. The data are clear on one point – there is no single effective coping strategy. At times, an individual needs to fight to change the situation itself; at other times, changing the meaning of the situation is all that is required: often, relaxing in the face of stress by running, swimming, meditating is helpful; and, finally, there are times when taking no action is the best strategy. Individuals who cope in a flexible manner, using a large repertoire of coping strategies, have better chances of adapting to the learning transition.

**Support systems** at the institution, at home, and in the community constitute the third area predicting readiness for a learning transition. In a recent study of adults engaged in non-traditional learning, we discovered that support is "a many splendored thing" (Schlossberg & Warren 1985). If you ask an adult learner if his or her significant other is supportive, the answer generally is in the affirmative. However, if you ask, "In what ways is your 'significant other' supportive; in what ways is your 'significant other' not supportive?", you assume that most people experience support as well as subtle, or not so subtle, sabotage. One woman, Virginia, left her job and returned to school full time. Her mother, who lived with her, was verbally very supportive. Yet right before class, Virginia's mother, who was immobile, would tell Virginia she needed something from the drug store. In addition, Virginia's friends kept telling her she was doing too much. After several months, Virginia withdrew from school.

### *Variability – participation in education*

Cross suggests another way to understand why one adult participates and another does not; or even why one person might, at one time in life, participate, and decline to do so at another time. Cross identifies three sets of factors that keep us from learning: dispositional, institutional, and situational (1981).

The **dispositional barriers** result from the attitudes people have about themselves. Only recently a person of 50 told me she was too old to go to graduate school. Ask yourself if you agree that age should be a variable in considering learning.

**Situational barriers** are those that are specific to a given individual at a particular time. For example, many adult children are caring for older parents and young adult children. This kin-keeping is a situational barrier, on the increase, which prohibits people from taking on a new activity such as returning to school.

The third set of barriers are **institutional** ones. Does the institution accommodate adults? Is there flexibility in scheduling and in awarding money

to part-time students? Are secretaries on duty after 4:30? Adult learners attribute great importance to the institution. If there are policies, procedures, and activities that make it possible for them to take classes at convenient times, to buy books at off-campus locations, to reach advisors on the phone easily, then adult learners are encouraged to participate. If on the other hand, the admissions policies discriminate against older students, if financial aid is not available, if rules and regulations are rigid and do not fit in with the complex lives of many adults, then they will be discouraged from attending and remaining.

It seems clear, based on the previous discussion, that before advisors, counsellors, administrators can do something to and for adult learners, they need to understand that adult learners are not just a category. Some are bright, others dull; some are knowledgeable, others ignorant; some are energetic, others apathetic; some are anxious, others self-confident; some process information in a rigid manner, others handle and digest complex ambiguous material. They are of varying ages and places in the life span and from different social classes. In other words, there is tremendous variability. I have pointed out four areas where variability seems most relevant to our discussion of understanding and reaching adult learners. They are: cognitive capacity, learning styles, readiness for learning, and participation in learning. The critical question now becomes: Once we have a knowledge base about adults, how can we reach them?

### **Reaching Adult Learners**

Our challenge, individually and collectively, is to vigorously pursue the goal of becoming sensitive and competent advisors for the future learners – adults. To illustrate, I will suggest a few new advising strategies, stemming from the knowledge we have of the adult's cognitive capacity, learning style, transition readiness, and participation. Perhaps there are many more.

#### ***Changing your climate***

Bernice Sandler, Director of the Project on the Status of Women, American Association of Colleges, studied the ways in which women perceive the classroom climate as chilly (Sandler & Hall, 1982). Thinking back to our Bag Lady, would she have been welcome in your office? Do you establish a chilly or warm office climate for adult learners? Would you encourage or discourage an adult considering a degree program at age 50? There are so many ways in which our attitudes about aging influence the climate we create. These kinds of attitudes are often deeply ingrained and negative; they must be resisted with new data about successful aging and the possibility of increasing cognitive capacity as one ages.



### *Increasing your advising repertoire*

If, as I believe we must, take Kolb's work seriously – that all of us learn differently – then effective advisors will strive to increase their advising repertoire. Let me illustrate with an example from the teaching role. I usually teach by abstract conceptualization. In a class designed to teach theories of adult development, I presented material in my traditional way – lecturing. After learning about Kolb's work, I realized that many of my students did not learn that way. I forced myself to expand my teaching repertoire. In order to have the students experience the different theories of adult development, I had them each think of something going on in their own lives and apply at least two different theories to their situation. In this way, I made the abstractions concrete. Then, I divided the room into four groups, each group representing one major theoretical position. The students saw a videotape of a middle age man. Each group debated the case from the point of view of the assigned theory. This forced them to experience the theories.

I realize there are tremendous differences between advising and teaching, but the process of expanding one's repertoire is similar. First, identify your usual style of advising. Then brainstorm additional strategies which will enable you to reach others whose style differs from yours.

### *Applying the transitional model*

This model enables individuals to score their readiness for a transition. First, an individual assesses the transition itself, the support systems, coping strategies, and inner resources. This assessment permits identification of the problem area or areas. Once an individual sees which of these factors are causing problems, the individual can take action by controlling the transition, mobilizing inner strengths, or modifying external resources and supports. To be more specific, we have developed the Transition Readiness Quotient (Schlossberg, et al., 1986). After completing it, the individual computes a score. The score indicates whether the person is ready for the transition, and indicates which area needs to be worked on – the transition, the environmental supports, or the individual's coping style.

Advisors have reported the usefulness of this tool. In one class of returning students, the adult learners can clearly pinpoint what areas they need to shore-up and why they are having problems. Mostly, it should help them develop a time perspective about transitions.

### *Creating a place for adults to matter*

The American Council on Education's Commission on Higher Education and Adult Learner commissioned the development of a self-study

guide. Representatives of over 200 institutions have attended workshops designed to prepare them to administer the guides on their own campuses. This environmental assessment is a first step to sensitizing the entire campus to the needs and importance of adults as learners (Commission on Higher Education and the Adult Learner, 1985).

In a recent study of adult learners and non-traditional institutions, a welcoming environment was defined by adults as having a place where they felt they mattered (Schlossberg & Warren, 1985). Our evaluation revealed a recurring theme through the interviews. It was the importance of mattering. The interviewees felt they mattered to an instructor, to the institution, to the program. This has stimulated research into the concept of mattering. Rosenberg, a sociologist at the University of Maryland, suggests that mattering is a motive that has been overlooked. In comparing delinquents and non-delinquents, he found that non-delinquents feel they mattered to teachers, to parents, to meaningful others who are not delinquent (1981). Rosenberg further suggests that mattering is important to retirees. If individuals retire and no longer feel that they matter, they are not likely to be very well adjusted. We contrast this with the midlife kin-keepers, who matter too much sometimes, like top administrators who also matter too much.

Mattering appears to be an important notion, and we are beginning to study the degree to which adult learners feel they matter to those of us in higher education. That is, the degree to which they feel they are appreciated; the degree to which they feel they are missed when they are not in class; the degree to which they feel that their success is a reflection on the professor. We will soon have a Mattering Scale that can be easily administered to learners. It will help identify areas on the campus that need improving so that learners feel they matter. You know how important it is for you to feel you matter – when you come to a conference, when you go to a workshop, when you teach a course. You want to feel you matter, that you are appreciated by your boss and by the people you supervise. And if it is that important to you, imagine how important it is to adult students. So, whatever the particular technique or the trend or the attitude is, if basically you can make your adult learners – who come in all sizes, shapes, colours, ethnic identifications, religions – feel they matter, then you have been a success.

The subject of adult learners is fascinating and manageable. It is successfully understood and implemented through a combination of theory and practice – seasoned with a healthy skepticism toward long cherished stereotypes. We can do it and do it better.

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