Adult Learner Autobiography

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I started this project with a little trepidation. My first impression led me to believe my experiences were limited. As I began brainstorming and exploring the assignment, I found that I have a wealth of experiences to draw on. There are many formal and informal learning experiences to be inspired by. I never reflected on my learning experiences before this. I now can see how they may inspire my teaching in the future.

My adult learning journey started in 1992 as I graduated high school and was headed off to college. I am not going to explore any of the experiences from my undergraduate degree. I don’t really consider it as adult learning. I was searching then, trying to find my independence. I was just learning how to be an adult that point. My real beginning in adult learning began three years later when I returned to East Carolina to study secondary education. I joined Project ACT, an accelerated program for lateral entry educators. I was part of a small cohort group of about 20 students. It began with immersion sessions in the summer, we attended classes 8:00am to 5:00pm Monday through Friday for 8 weeks. It was followed by two semesters of semi-distance education, where we would meet once or twice a month for an all day Saturday class.

I found the immersion sessions extremely helpful. The benefits were abundant. Our small cohort group formed close relationships that supported our work through the duration of our certificate program and on into our brand new careers as educators. It was helpful to have another person in the same situation. We were able to call on each other for help with lesson plans, behavior problems or to just share experiences. Another benefit is that we were immersed in the subject matter. We were able to devote our full attention to learning the basics of teaching. We were eating, drinking and sleeping those education courses. Kolb would be very proud of our instructors. Kolb’s learning cycle (1984) was fully engaged. We had concrete experience in class, through class discussion we were able to reflect on the information given and begin to
form abstract concepts. The final step to the cycle was in our assignments, we were able to experiment with the information we had taken in and reflected upon.

While I benefited from the structure of this course, I do see some challenges. I am left with questions about the broad application of this method. Universities have thousands of students not twenty. How would you employ this concentrated 8-5 schedule on a larger scale? I liked to be in the same classes as my group, we never separated, it encouraged strong relationships. But most adult learners can’t devote long periods of dedicated school time. Adult learners have numerous responsibilities at work and at home. There is also the question of burnout. I was actively engaged in the coursework because I wanted to be. I was motivated by personal and professional goals. But what if the course was longer or what if I wasn’t 100% motivated by my own goals. Would I burn out? Would I be a strong classmate or would I slow down the class’s progress by not being fully engaged.

I taught High School Biology for three years before accepting a position as laboratory technician. I was a little rusty when it came to bench work. My coworkers and supervisors would often show me a new technique or procedure. While this wasn’t a formal learning experience, it did teach me something about myself and learning. New techniques were usually taught as follows.

1. Technique is demonstrated.
2. Technique is performed with assistance.
3. Technique is performed with supervision.
4. Technique is performed with no assistance.
5. Technique steps are recorded.
This manner of instruction was able to provide immediate feedback. Mistakes or missing steps were quickly addressed and corrected. A previous assignment in this current course tested me high on the visual and sequential learning styles. I believe that is why I find this teaching method so effective. I can still remember the way my notebook pages looked with steps outlined and pictures representing the laboratory techniques. Those experiments were firmly planted in my brain.

This type of learning does have significance for me. I learned how important it is to engage the four pillars of learning outlined by Zull (2006). (Gather, Reflecting, Creating and Testing) I was able to gather information by watching the techniques demonstrated. Reflecting brings the understanding, or associations, that certain steps come before others. The reflecting stage is where I comprehended what the technique was supposed to accomplish. When I was allowed to perform the technique I recreated the steps intentionally, using the gathered data and the associations I had made. When I wrote down the steps and drew diagrams to record what I had done I was testing the technique. It was an active event that closed the cycle of learning.

I am left wondering how you would employ this method to larger groups of learners. I can remember back to chemistry labs in my undergrad career. If you weren’t fully engaged in the process and within good earshot of the instructor, you could ‘mis’learn the techniques. Immediate course correction may not have occurred because the instructor was engaged elsewhere. I also wonder how this method would be employed with different subject matter. This step by step method works well with sequential hands on tasks, how well would it work with a class on theory. I do believe this stepped method of teaching would benefit my current career as a health and safety educator.
I left the laboratory after a grant funding issue. An education specialist position was open with our safety department and it seemed like a perfect fit. I had never done any adult education or designed any e-learning. My deficiencies led to numerous opportunities for formal and informal learning experiences. While I had used PeopleSoft, PowerPoint, Publisher, Excel, I now had to expand my knowledge and become an expert user. Wake Forest Baptist Health employs nearly 16,000 people, that does not include interns, students, visiting professionals and volunteers. This large number necessitates the use of e-learning for our annual required training. I had e-learning publishing software called Articulate on my desktop but I didn’t know how to use it. I employed a few different methods to self teach the software. I used trial and error on dummy presentations. I printed out the manual and learned a lot by poking around and trying different things. I called other people within our organization that had used the program. They were able to help out a little but it became clear I would need more resources. I started posting questions and reading the online forums supported by the company, they were very helpful. The forums provided immediate feedback on any issues or questions I may have from actual users of the product. These forums were particularly helpful in that they were monitored by the company’s technology experts. Over a few months, I became quite efficient in publishing e-learning. I was left with the questions, am I doing this right? Is there an easier way? I am a one woman training department so validation did not come.

I took a formal Articulate class after using the software for about a year. I finally validated that my self-teaching method. I confirmed the proper use of the software and I picked up some new ideas and techniques. I was, however, disappointed with the pace of the class. There were many different skill levels in the class. We were all supposed to be new to Articulate
but it seemed that many were uncomfortable with the basic supporting programs like PowerPoint.

This experience leaves me with some questions and ideas. First, the online forums were more helpful than I had anticipated. It was a great way to get immediate help on specific topics. It accommodated a large group of people and did not need to completely rely on the facilitators. Second, did I teach myself the material in the most time effective manner? This course was taught in 8 hours what took me 4 months. Third, I was very frustrated by the pace of the class. We were constantly held up by users with that had significantly less face time with the software. So is there a benefit to a trial and error period with new material? Should there be a period of self instruction before formal instruction. Fourth, how do you accommodate for learners that would like to jump ahead or delve deeper into subject matter while others are still trying to grasp the basics?

My most recent learning experience is this one. I have written many papers for many classes but I did not see the importance until now. Once I started to examine myself as a learner, I found usable insight in this process. Writing assignments are difficult for me and papers like this have always been a challenge. The anticipation of a large project, reliant on my reflections causes anxiety that can sometimes paralyze my progress. I attempt overcome this feeling by brainstorming. I start writing sentences and fragments relating to the assignment. It helps clear the barrage of random thoughts and to break down the assignment. I always prefer to explain a process, write outline or make bullet points. Fleshing out those ideas with reflections and associations is not a skill that comes naturally to me. I can perform an experiment, write an outline of the process and explain the results. My difficulties lie with writing about how the results impacted me, how they impacted my research. The significance is that it caused me to
pause and think about my previous learning, challenging me to form associations. Taking me outside my comfort zone did not just commit the experiences to memory so I could repeat them but it allowed me to apply the significance of them elsewhere.

In conclusion, my most significant learning experiences are important for different reasons. My most enjoyable learning is usually one on one or with small groups doing hands on learning. In these situations I get the immediate course correction to keep myself on a positive track with my lessons. My most challenging learning is one on one time with myself, reflecting and making connections. As a teacher or facilitator I now get to work out the adaption of my discoveries. I am left with the questions I have proposed and the challenge of applying the answers. My goal is to take what I learn here and provide enjoyable, interactive, and convenient training to large groups of professionals.
References
