

Adult Learner Interview

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Introduction

I chose to explore two people that are broadly educated. My two interviewees have both changed career paths at least twice. Each career change provided and required both formal and informal learning. The two people are at opposite ends of their careers. One is younger in mid to early mid adulthood and embarking on their third career. The other is winding down their third career and looking towards retirement. I wanted to explore how a person in later adulthood with a wealth of experience views learning; how do they look back and interpret their experiences. I set that against my other interview, to see how a person at the beginning of their desired career and educational track views learning.

I started the interview guide by brainstorming. I wrote a list of objectives based on two things. First, I thought about my own preconceived notions of learning, before this class. Secondly, I thought about my expanded view and definition of learning from this course. I attempted to formulate questions that I thought would provide me with the information I needed.

I asked for an educational and career background from each of my interviewee's. The goal was to gain a sense of their history. It allowed me to form context while speaking with them and allowed me to reflect more easily later. I directed my interviewees to not address their initial undergraduate degree. I had them focus on the education and learning that came after it.

I spent a great deal of time in my early career track pursuing the right career path. Education was a pathway to expand on my knowledge and be able to speak and operate from a position of authority. I wanted to get an idea of my interviewee's motivations. Why did they change careers? Was it because of personal, professional or spiritual reasons? What drove them to educate themselves? Why was it necessary to seek educational experiences? Did negative

experiences impact them? Was it a long term effect or could they isolate it to just that class, experience or teacher.

Before this class I used the term learning to describe formal education. I put learning into a box. Learning or education was information delivered to me by a teacher. Learning involved reading chapters and having discussions with teachers and fellow students. There was an authority involved, someone who knew the answers and could steer me and the class in the right direction. I put informal learning experiences into a separate box. Much of it was collaborative and didn't completely rely on an authority. Knowledge was attained through discussion and debate, through trial and error. I was curious to know what other people defined as learning. Would they only consider formal classroom experiences? Would they consider self-directed and other informal learning?

I perceive myself as a visual learner. I like to form mental maps to orient myself in space and in subject matter. I took cues from our learning and cognitive style activities and explored how they like information presented to them, how they present information to others. I asked questions that would tell me how they begin tasks. I was also interested to know what resources they turn to for support.

I think a facilitator or teacher has influence over the learning process. They determine the direction and attitude of a learning experience. My interviewees shared the characteristics that make a good facilitator. I wanted to know how much of an impact their teacher and mentors had on them. Were they an integral part of their learning experience or did they fade into the background.

I have narrowed my career path and am now seeking education to excel in it. My approach to learning has changed dramatically. Is it because I am more mature? Is it because I

feel like I am on the right path? I wanted to find out if they approached tasks and assignments differently, throughout their adulthood. What are the reasons for the different attitudes and approaches?

Method

Dave B. is my supervisor and my mentor. Dave B. is close to retiring and ending his professional career, or so he says. I wanted to know if his motivations to learn are different now than they were in his early adulthood. Dave B is from a different generation than I am. His background is very different than mine and the other interviewee.

Dave B. graduated from his undergraduate program and entered the Navy. He spent seven years as an officer. During his time in the Navy, he married and had four children. He then entered the seminary to obtain a Masters of Divinity. A busy home life meant taking 5 years to navigate a three year program. He worked as a pastor and then an HR consultant for pastoral services for many years before getting an HR consulting account with a University. This contract led him down a path where he ended up doing Health and Safety audits and ultimately being hired as staff. He quickly moved up the ladder and was appointed director of the health and safety department. He started a self-directed program towards being a Certified Safety Professional (CSP). The process involved years of self-directed study in order to pass a rigorous exam. He has had many informal learning experiences after the CSP but they did not appear to have major significance in our interview.

Steph Y. is my friend and peer. Steph Y. has experiences that are very close to mine. I picked her to compare and contrast my own view against someone I consider an equal and a peer. I thought it would be interesting to see if her experiences and opinions mirrored mine or contrasted with mine.

Stephanie got a 'regular 9-5' job after graduating with her undergraduate degree. She worked for a small period of time and became dissatisfied with the direction of her career. She returned for a second undergraduate degree, this one was a nursing program. It was an accelerated immersion program. Practicing nursing is where she found her calling. She decided her path was to educate nurses. She returned to school via distance education to obtain a master's degree. The degree is still in process. During this process she was offered a position at a local community college teaching nursing classes.

Results

I began each interview with a brief history; I have already outlined those in a previous section. After giving me a rundown of their adult learning lives, I inquired why they pursued adult learning. I found that each career and career change provided different motivations. Dave B. entered the seminary for spiritual reasons. He relayed that it felt like a natural progression in his faith. He also felt it would be a sustainable career track and would provide for his young family. The same reasons that drew him to the seminary forced him away. Spiritually his course was not as a pastor. Survival is what drove him to pursue accreditation as a Certified Safety Professional. He was supervising and advising on health and safety issues and did not have a degree or certification to back him up. He considered another graduate degree to learn the necessary information to be certified; he ultimately decided that a self-directed approach fit his lifestyle better.

Steph Y. entered the accelerated nursing program to find a sustainable career with a decent paycheck. She started pursuing her master's degree for a different reason. Her master's degree would allow her to advance in her career. She made it clear to me that making more

money was not the issue. She wanted to teach others how to be effective in the nursing workplace. An advanced degree was an integral part of that.

I had them expand on the more significant learning events in their lives. I wanted to know what they considered learning and why these experiences were noteworthy. Dave B's time in the Navy stood out as his most significant learning experience. He was highly motivated to do well and excel at his post. His motivation stemmed from the responsibility he was given. The chain of command relied on him to do his job well. This chain of command offered opportunities for highly structured education. He was enrolled in a six month program to teach him how to be a supply chain officer. This was mostly classroom based education. He was then appointed as an assistant to an officer. This assistance experience was what I describe as a cognitive apprenticeship. (Mackeracher, 2004) He was able to observe and practice under direct supervision before he was assigned his own ship. The apprenticeship experience was valuable because he learned the essential interpersonal skills that the structured classroom did not provide to him.

Steph Y. spoke about simulation and role-playing as her most significant experiences. In career as a nurse and her new role as an instructor she has been exposed to this method. Simulation exercises have changed vastly since the old CPR dummies I remember in lifeguard class. The present day simulators are quite sophisticated. They will even simulate childbirth. The role-playing exercises for her current teaching position addressed simple confrontations with students. Confronting a student about being late or their lack of personal hygiene can be potentially embarrassing for both parties. Practicing the situation with another person made the confrontations made it easier to do.

Each interviewee was presented with a couple of simple scenarios to explore how they would start a project with minimal direction. What resources would they employ to get results? The goal was to explore the learner's style. (Kolb, 1984) In the first scenario I gave them an imaginary box from IKEA. I didn't tell them what the item was and I didn't get them a picture. Most people are familiar with IKEA furniture, it all needs assembly and comes with a sparse instruction sheet. Dave B. sought out an image of the finished product and then read the direction sheet to assemble. Steph Y. thought she could determine what the item was by laying out the items. She would then just dive in, using the direction sheet as a supplement if she needed it. They did not employ a web search or phone the company. They each relied on themselves to get the project done.

The second scenario was to get me driving directions from Richmond to Tampa. Dave B. pulled out an atlas and talked me through the directions, pointing out the route and the potential trouble spots as he explained. He did not use the internet or write down any directions. Steph Y. did an internet search and handed me a list of turn by turn directions. She did not get out a map or present a map image. This scenario led to other questions, how they like to receive information. They both said they preferred a visual representation, but that conflicts with what Steph Y. gave me for directions. Dave B. was more accurate in that he likes a visual with dialogue to explain. Both interviewees preferred to be shown how to do something rather than read about it.

I inquired about teachers, the characteristics of good ones and their impact on the learning process. Both of my interviewees immediately said that a teacher should have "passion for the subject". Dave B. told of an old professor in seminary that "came alive" when he taught. He spoke from a position of great passion and it was infectious to him as a student. Steph Y.

related a story about a teacher that was able to joke about her subject in a manner that endeared it to the other. The teacher had such passion for the subject that she was able to relay the good and bad through humor. Steph Y. also added that confidence as a teacher or facilitator is an important characteristic. Being a nursing student she respected a teacher having enough confidence to let the student practice procedures. Steph Y. appreciated the sharing of life experiences as a means to impart knowledge. Emotional connection to the subject and teacher can be an important relationship. Many educators see emotion as a roadblock or baggage. (Dirkx, 2001) I questioned my interviewees about negative experiences and the emotions associated. Both said that demotivating or overly critical teachers were a detriment to their studies. Steph Y. added a particularly negative experience where a teacher taught from instilling fear in her students. She made the only goal getting good grade not learning the material.

I ended having each interviewee think about an early and a late learning experience. The goal was to explore what kind of psychological model they followed. Were they influenced by their life stages or their life events? (Courtenay, 1994) What brought about changes in their motivations, styles and goals had changed as they aged and matured. Dave B. said his early experiences lacked context, he learned because he was told to. His motivations were to survive and keep his position. Now, in the waning years of his career, he finds himself calmer. He is now motivated to explore learning as a means to make systems better at work or to improve himself. His goal is no longer to advance professionally. Steph Y. said her early experiences were about searching and finding her path in life. Her early experiences were motivated by the need to survive. Now her learning is geared towards self improvement with an eye towards advancing her career. Her motivations now are to be a good role model for her daughter and to show her that a woman can be a mother and a successful professional.

Reflection

My interviewee's both enjoyed this exercise. Steph Y. liked it because she is embarking on a career as an adult educator. Coming from a nursing background not education, she appreciated the discussion as it started her thinking about students learning style and motives. Dave B. is what I would consider a spiritual man; he valued the discussion as a tool to explore himself. He enjoyed exploring how his motivations have changed throughout the years. He particularly enjoyed exploring his learning experiences in the Navy and realizing how it changed him as a person.

Motivation to embark on learning experiences was something I wanted to explore. In my early adulthood I was searching for the right path. My early learning experiences helped me change careers and search for my place in the professional world. My later learning felt more targeted. I had found my purpose and was going to expand my knowledge of it in order to excel. Steph Y.'s story is very similar to mine and I did not find that she had different motivations. Her later learning experiences are leading her towards a well defined goal.

Dave B., on the other hand, said was motivated by family tradition, spirituality and job security. Early in his adulthood he let his spiritual self guide his process, ultimately, I don't think his motivations were much different than Steph Y.'s and mine. He was searching for his place in the world too. What he thought was spiritual motivation in the beginning by pursuing a seminary degree was actually the searching behavior displayed by Steph Y. and me. The real spiritual learning is being done now. He takes on learning experiences to improve himself or the systems he has put in place.

Nether of my interviews focused on routine, everyday learning experiences. When conceiving the interview guide, I have to admit I always had formal learning on my mind. When

I questioned my interviewee's, each person focused on formal learning experiences. Steph Y. talked a little bit about her informal on the job nursing training in the hospital. I have to agree, while I see some of my on the job training as a laboratory technician as informal, it was still dedicated towards training for my job. Learning to bake and learning to sew is technically learning but I do not view it in the same way as learning to do cell culture techniques in the lab.

Both of my interviewee's communicated that a teacher needs to be passionate about the subject they are teaching. I do not agree, I think a teacher needs to be passionate about teaching and sharing knowledge. I am a health and safety trainer, and I do not have a passion for arc flash training. I do have a passion for presenting material with enthusiasm and context. I need the employees I train to connect the information to their job duties. I want the engineers to walk away from arc flash training knowing how to be safe around high voltage electricity.

I asked about negative experiences in the classroom or during learning experiences. Both of my interviewee's conveyed that negative experiences affected them. Dave recalled a couple of particularly de-motivating teachers. Steph recalled a teacher that taught by instilling the fear of failure in her students. Neither person thought the experience carried over to other courses. I too have had negative experiences in the classroom. I don't carry them from class to class, I don't judge an entire process or school or course of study based on one bad experience. So why doesn't a negative experience contaminate an entire experience? Is this because of maturity or age? I do think I am able to look past bad experiences and see the end goal.

In conclusion, I think this experience may have been more eye-opening for the people I interviewed. I enjoyed listening to their stories, I feel like I know each of them better now than I did before. But, if I were to do this exercise again, I would like to interview individuals without a college education or someone from a minority group. Learning about critical theory in our

group project, I feel like my insights may have been better by challenging my own assumptions about my learners and myself.

References

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- Mackeracher, D. (2004). Skilled Performance in Learning. *Making Sense of Adult Learning Key* (pp. 139-150). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Adult Learning Interview Guide

Name:

1. Brief Biography of interviewee's adult learning experience

2. Why do you or why have you pursued adult learning opportunities?

3. Why do you want to do well and learn? What motivated you?

4. What are a few past learning experiences that stick out in your mind? (formal or informal) Why do you think these are significant?

5. Have you had any negative learning experiences? How do they impact your learning or your motivation to learn? (then and in the future?)

6. What do you think makes a good teacher, instructor or facilitator?

7. Do you think your attitude towards a facilitator, subject or experience influences how well you can learn? Do you have any examples?

8. Do you prefer information to be presented as a table/graph or as text or a lecture/talk? How do you best absorb new information?

9. How do you tackle learning experiences? (Scenarios follow)
 - a. You are given a box from ikea. You are not told what the item is and you have never seen it assembled. How do you proceed?

 - b. I need to know how to get from Richmond VA to Tampa FL. I want you to help me. How do you proceed in getting me that info?

10. Do you find that you learn better when you read about something or practice it?

11. Can you tell me about an early adulthood and your most recent learning experience? When, where, how, motives

12. Do they feel that your learning style and motivations have changed from early to later experiences?

What I am trying to find out:

What they perceive as learning

Does attitude or emotion play a part?

Motives to pursue learning

Motivation to continue, finish and excel at learning

How can a facilitator impact the learning process?

How do negative experiences impact attitudes toward learning, immediate and long term

What type of learner are they? text, visual, auditory?

How do they initiate informal learning processes?

How do they overcome challenges, schedule, lack of motivation, lack of understanding, negative attitudes?

Do they feel that their learning style and motivations have changed from early to later adulthood?